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# Our Eternity

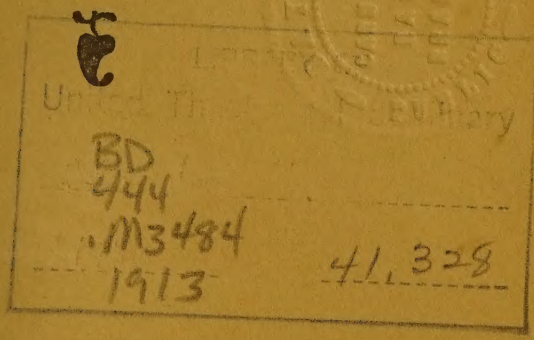
BY

MAURICE MAETERLINCK

1862-1949

*Translated by*

ALEXANDER TEIXEIRA DE MATTOS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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Our Eternity *is a very considerable extension of the essay on* Death *which was published as a separate work in* 1911 *and which is now superseded by the present volume. Chapters IV to VIII are entirely new and the author has added largely to all the other chapters. The translation of those portions of the book which have already appeared in print has been revised from end to end.*

*In the reports of conversations held through mediums at various spiritualistic sittings, I have quoted the* ipsissima verba *of the speakers.*

A. T. DE M.

CHELSEA, 6 *May*, 1913.



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# CHAPTER I

## OUR INJUSTICE TO DEATH

# OUR ETERNITY

## CHAPTER I

### OUR INJUSTICE TO DEATH

I

IT has been well said:

"Death and death alone is what we must consult about life; and not some vague future or survival, where we shall not be. It is our own end; and everything happens in the interval between death and now. Do not talk to me of those imaginary prolongations which wield over us the childish spell of number; do not talk to me—to me who am to die outright—of societies and peoples! There is no reality, there is no true duration, save that between the cradle and the grave. The rest is mere bombast, show, delusion! They call me a master because of some magic in my speech and

thoughts; but I am a frightened child in the presence of death!"[1]

2

That is where we stand. For us, death is the one event that counts in our life and in our universe. It is the point whereat all that escapes our vigilance unites and conspires against our happiness. The more our thoughts struggle to turn away from it, the closer do they press around it. The more we dread it, the more dreadful it becomes, for it but thrives on our fears. He who seeks to forget it has his memory filled with it; he who tries to shun it meets naught else. It clouds everything with its shadow. But though we think of death incessantly, we do so unconsciously, without learning to know death. We compel our attention to turn its back upon it, instead of going to it with uplifted head. All the

[1]Marie Lenéru, *Les Affranchis,* Act iii, sc. 4.

forces which might avail to face death we exhaust in averting our will from it. We deliver death into the groping hands of instinct and we grant it not one hour of our intelligence. Is it surprising that the idea of death, which should be the most perfect and the most luminous of ideas—being the most persistent and the most inevitable—remains the flimsiest and the only one that is a laggard? How should we know the one power which we never look in the face? How could it have profited by gleams kindled only to help us escape it? To fathom its abysses, we wait until the most enfeebled, the most disordered moments of our life arrive. We do not think of death until we have no longer the strength, I will not say, to think, but even to breathe. A man returning among us from another century would have difficulty in recognizing, in the depths of a present-day soul, the image of his gods, of his duty, of his love or

of his universe; but the figure of death, when everything has changed around it and when even that which composes it and upon which it depends has vanished, he would find almost untouched, rough-drawn as it was by our fathers, hundreds, nay, thousands of years ago. Our intelligence, grown so bold and active, has not worked upon this figure, has not, so to speak, retouched it in any way. Though we may no longer believe in the tortures of the damned, all the vital cells of the most sceptical among us are still steeped in the appalling mystery of the Hebrew Sheol, the pagan Hades, or the Christian Hell. Though it may no longer be lighted by very definite flames, the gulf still opens at the end of life and, if less known, is all the more formidable. And, therefore, when the impending hour strikes to which we dared not raise our eyes, everything fails us at the same time. Those two or three uncertain ideas whereon, without

examining them, we had meant to lean, give way like rushes beneath the weight of the last minutes. In vain we seek a refuge among reflections that are illusive or are strange to us and do not know the roads to our heart. No one awaits us on the last shore where all is unprepared, where naught remains afoot save terror.

3

Bossuet, the great poet of the tomb, says: "It is not worthy of a Christian"—and I would add, of a man—"to postpone his struggle with death until the moment when it arrives to carry him off."

It were a salutary thing for each of us to work out his idea of death in the light of his days and the strength of his intelligence and to stand by it. He would say to death:

"I know not who you are, or I would be your master; but, in days when my eyes saw clearer than to-day, I learned what you

were not: that is enough to prevent you from becoming mine."

He would thus bear, graven on his memory, a tried image against which the last agony would not prevail and from which the phantom-stricken eyes would draw fresh comfort. Instead of the terrible prayer of the dying, which is the prayer of the depths, he would say his own prayer, that of the peaks of his existence, where would be gathered, like angels of peace, the most lucid, the most rarefied thoughts of his life. Is not that the prayer of prayers? After all, what is a true and worthy prayer, if not the most ardent and disinterested effort to reach and grasp the unknown?

4

"The doctors and the priests," said Napoleon, "have long been making death grievous."

And Bacon wrote:

*"Pompa mortis magis terret quam mors ipsa."*

Let us, then, learn to look upon death as it is in itself, free from the horrors of matter and stripped of the terrors of the imagination. Let us first get rid of all that goes before and does not belong to it. Thus, we impute to it the tortures of the last illness; and that is not just. Illnesses have nothing in common with that which ends them. They form part of life and not of death. We readily forget the most cruel sufferings that restore us to health; and the first sun of convalescence destroys the most unbearable memories of the chamber of pain. But let death come; and at once we overwhelm it with all the evil done before it. Not a tear but is remembered and used as a reproach, not a cry of pain but becomes a cry of accusation. Death alone bears the weight of the errors of nature or the ignorance of science that have uselessly prolonged tor-

ments in whose name we curse death because it puts a term to them.

5

In point of fact, whereas sicknesses belong to nature or to life, the agony which seems peculiar to death is wholly in the hands of men. Now what we most dread is the awful struggle at the end and especially the last, terrible second of rupture which we shall perhaps see approaching during long hours of helplessness and which suddenly hurls us, naked, disarmed, abandoned by all and stripped of everything, into an unknown that is the home of the only invincible terrors which the soul of man has ever felt.

It is doubly unjust to impute the torments of that second to death. We shall see presently in what manner a man of to-day, if he would remain faithful to his ideas, should picture to himself the unknown into

which death flings us. Let us confine ourselves here to the last struggle. As science progresses, it prolongs the agony which is the most dreadful moment and the sharpest peak of human pain and horror, for the watchers, at least; for very often the consciousness of him whom death, in Bossuet's phrase, has "brought to bay" is already greatly dulled and perceives no more than the distant murmur of the sufferings which it seems to be enduring. All doctors consider it their first duty to prolong to the uttermost even the cruellest pangs of the most hopeless agony. Who has not, at the bedside of a dying man, twenty times wished and not once dared to throw himself at their feet and implore them to show mercy? They are filled with so great a certainty and the duty which they obey leaves so little room for the least doubt that pity and reason, blinded by tears, curb their revolt and recoil before a law which all recog-

nize and revere as the highest law of man's conscience.

6

One day, this prejudice will strike us as barbarous. Its roots go down to the unacknowledged fears left in the heart by religions that have long since died out in the intelligence of men. That is why the doctors act as though they were convinced that there is no known torture but is preferable to those awaiting us in the unknown. They seem persuaded that every minute gained amid the most intolerable sufferings is snatched from the incomparably more dreadful sufferings which the mysteries of the hereafter reserve for men; and, of two evils, to avoid that which they know to be imaginary, they choose the only real one. Besides, in thus postponing the end of a torture, which, as old Seneca says, is the best part of that torture, they are but yielding

to the unanimous error which makes its enclosing circle more iron-bound every day: the prolongation of the agony increasing the horror of death; and the horror of death demanding the prolongation of the agony.

7

The doctors, on their side, say or might say that, in the present stage of science, two or three cases excepted, there is never a certainty of death. Not to support life to its last limits, even at the cost of insupportable torments, might be murder. Doubtless there is not one chance in a hundred thousand that the patient escape. No matter. If that chance exist which, in the majority of cases, will give but a few days, or, at the utmost, a few months of a life that will not be the real life, but much rather, as the Romans called it, "an extended death," those hundred thousand useless torments will not have been in vain. A

single hour snatched from death outweighs a whole existence of tortures.

Here are, face to face, two values that cannot be compared; and, if we mean to weigh them in the same balance, we must heap the scale which we see with all that remains to us, that is to say, with every imaginable pain, for at the decisive hour this is the only weight which counts and which is heavy enough to raise by a hair-breadth the other scale that dips into what we do not see and is loaded with the thick darkness of another world.

8

Swollen by so many adventitious horrors, the horror of death becomes such that, without reasoning, we accept the doctors' reasons. And yet there is one point on which they are beginning to yield and to agree. They are slowly consenting, when there is no hope left, if not to deaden, at

least to dull the last agonies. Formerly, none of them would have dared to do so; and, even to-day, many of them hesitate and, like misers, measure out niggardly drops of the clemency and peace which they ought to lavish and which they grudge in their dread of weakening the last resistance, that is to say, the most useless and painful quiverings of reluctant life refusing to give place to oncoming rest.

It is not for me to decide whether their pity might show greater daring. It is enough to state once more that all this has no concern with death. It happens before it and beneath it. It is not the arrival of death, but the departure of life that is appalling. It is not death, but life that we must act upon. It is not death that attacks life; it is life that wrongfully resists death. Evils hasten up from every side at the approach of death, but not at its call; and, though they gather round it, they did not

come with it. Do you accuse sleep of the fatigue that oppresses you if you do not yield to it? All those strugglings, those waitings, those tossings, those tragic cursings are on that side of the slope to which we cling and not on the other side. They are, for that matter, accidental and temporary and emanate only from our ignorance. All our knowledge merely helps us to die a more painful death than the animals that know nothing. A day will come when science will turn upon its error and no longer hesitate to shorten our woes. A day will come when it will dare and act with certainty; when life, grown wiser, will depart silently at its hour, knowing that it has reached its term, even as it withdraws silently every evening, knowing that its task is done. Once the doctor and the sick man have learned what they have to learn, there will be no physical nor metaphysical reason why the advent of death should not be as

salutary as that of sleep. Perhaps even, as there will be nothing else to take into consideration, it will be possible to surround death with profounder ecstasies and fairer dreams. In any case and from this day, with death once acquitted of that which goes before, it will be easier to look upon it without fear and to lighten that which comes after.

9

Death, as we usually picture it, has two terrors looming behind it. The first has neither face nor form and permeates the whole region of our mind; the other is more definite, more explicit, but almost as powerful. The latter strikes all our senses. Let us examine it first.

Even as we impute to death all the evils that precede it, so do we add to the dread which it inspires all that happens beyond it, thus doing it the same injustice at its going

as at its coming. Is it death that digs our graves and orders us to keep there that which is made to disappear? If we cannot think without horror of what befalls the beloved in the grave, is it death or we that placed him there? Because death carries the spirit to some place unknown, shall we reproach it with our bestowal of the body which it leaves with us? Death descends into our midst to change the place of a life or change its form: let us judge it by what it does and not by what we do before it comes and after it is gone. For it is already far away when we begin the frightful work which we try hard to prolong to the very utmost, as though we were persuaded that it is our only security against forgetfulness. I am well aware that, from any other than the human point of view, this proceeding is very innocent; and that, looked upon from a sufficient height, decomposing flesh is no more repulsive than a fading flower or a

crumbling stone. But, when all is said, it offends our senses, shocks our memory, daunts our courage, whereas it would be so easy for us to avoid the foul ordeal. Purified by fire, the remembrance lives enthroned as a beautiful idea; and death is naught but an immortal birth cradled in flames. This has been well understood by the wisest and happiest nations in history. What happens in our graves poisons our thoughts together with our bodies. The figure of death, in the imagination of men, depends before all upon the form of burial; and the funeral rites govern not only the fate of those who depart, but also the happiness of those who stay, for they raise in the ultimate background of life the great image upon which men's eyes linger in consolation or despair.

10

There is, therefore, but one terror particular to death: that of the unknown into

which it hurls us. In facing it, let us lose no time in putting from our minds all that the positive religions have left there. Let us remember only that it is not for us to prove that they are not proved, but for them to establish that they are true. Now not one of them brings us a proof before which an honest intelligence can bow. Nor would it suffice if that intelligence were able to bow; for man lawfully to believe and thus to limit his endless seeking, the proof would need to be irresistible. The God offered to us by the best and strongest of them has given us our reason to employ loyally and fully, that is to say, to try to attain, before all and in all things, that which appears to be the truth. Can He exact that we should accept, in spite of it, a belief whose doubtfulness, from the human point of view, is not denied by its wisest and most ardent defenders? He only offers us a very uncertain story, which, even if

scientifically substantiated, would be merely a beautiful lesson in morality and which is buttressed by prophecies and miracles no less doubtful. Must we here call to mind that Pascal, to defend that creed which was already tottering at a time when it seemed at its zenith, vainly attempted a demonstration the mere sight of which would be enough to destroy the last remnant of faith in a wavering mind? Better than any other, he knew the stock proofs of the theologians, for they had been the sole study of the last years of his life. If but one of these proofs could have resisted examination, his genius, one of the three or four most profound and lucid geniuses ever known to humanity, must have given it an irresistible force. But he does not linger over these arguments, whose weakness he feels too well; he pushes them scornfully aside, he glories and, in a manner, rejoices in their futility:

"Who then will blame Christians for not being able to give a reason for their faith, those who profess a religion for which they cannot give a reason? They declare, in presenting it to the world, that it is a foolishness, *stultitiam;* and then you complain that they do not prove it! If they proved it, they would not be keeping their word; it is in being destitute of proofs that they are not destitute of sense."

His solitary argument, the one to which he clings desperately and devotes all the power of his genius, is the very condition of man in the universe, that incomprehensible medley of greatness and wretchedness, for which there is no accounting save by the mystery of the first fall:

"For man is more incomprehensible without that mystery than the mystery itself is incomprehensible to man."

He is therefore reduced to establishing the truth of the Scriptures by an argument

drawn from the very Scriptures in question; and—what is more serious—to explain a wide and great and indisputable mystery by another, small, narrow and crude mystery that rests only upon the legend which it is his business to prove. And, let us observe in passing, it is a fatal thing to replace one mystery by another and lesser mystery. In the hierarchy of the unknown, mankind always ascends from the smaller to the greater. On the other hand, to descend from the greater to the smaller is to relapse into the condition of primitive man, who carries his barbarism to the point of replacing the infinite by a fetish or an amulet. The measure of man's greatness is the greatness of the mysteries which he cultivates or on which he dwells.

To return to Pascal, he feels that everything is crumbling around him; and so, in the collapse of human reason, he at last offers us the monstrous wager that is the

supreme avowal of the bankruptcy and despair of his faith. God, he says, meaning his God and the Christian religion with all its precepts and all its consequences, exists or does not exist. We are unable, by human arguments, to prove that He exists or that He does not exist.

"If there is a God, He is infinitely incomprehensible, because, having neither divisions nor bounds, He has no relation to us. We are therefore incapable of knowing either what He is or if He is."

God is or is not.

"But to which side shall we lean? Reason can determine nothing about it. There is an infinite gulf that separates us. A game is played at the uttermost part of this infinite distance, in which heads may turn up or tails. Which will you wager? There is no reason for betting on either one or the other; you cannot reasonably defend either."

The correct course would be not to wager at all.

"Yes, but you must wager: this is not a matter for your will; you are launched in it."

Not to wager that God exists means wagering that He does not exist, for which He will punish you eternally. What then do you risk by wagering, at all hazards, that He exists? If He does not, you lose a few small pleasures, a few wretched comforts of this life, because your little sacrifice will not have been rewarded; if He exists, you gain an eternity of unspeakable happiness.

" 'It is true, but, in spite of all, I am so made that I cannot believe.'

"Never mind, follow the way in which they began who believe and who at first did not believe either, taking holy water, having masses said, etc. That in itself will make you believe and will reduce you to the level of the beasts.

" 'But that is just what I am afraid of.'

"Why? What have you to lose?"

Nearly three centuries of apologetics have not added one useful argument to that terrible and despairing page of Pascal. And this is all that human intelligence has found to compel our life. If the God who demands our faith will not have us decide by our reason, by what then must our choice be made? By usage? By the accidents of race or birth, by some æsthetic or sentimental pitch-and-toss? Or has He set within us another higher and surer faculty before which the understanding must yield? If so, where is it? What is its name? If this God punishes us for not having blindly followed a faith that does not force itself irresistibly upon the intelligence which He gave us; if He chastises us for not having made, in the presence of the great enigma with which He confronts us, a choice which is rejected by that best and most divine part

which He has implanted in us, we have nothing left to reply; we are the dupes of a cruel and incomprehensible sport, we are the victims of a terrible snare and an immense injustice; and, whatever the torments wherewith that injustice may load us, they will be less intolerable than the eternal presence of its Author.

# CHAPTER II

## ANNIHILATION

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## ANNIHILATION

### I

AND now we stand before the abyss. It is void of all the dreams with which our fathers peopled it. They thought that they knew what was there; we know only what is not there. It is the vaster by all that we have learned to know nothing of. While waiting for a scientific certainty to break through its darkness—for man has the right to hope for that which he does not yet conceive—the only point that interests us, because it is situated in the little circle which our actual intelligence traces in the thickest blackness of the night, is to know whether the unknown for which we are bound will be dreadful or not.

Outside the religions, there are four

imaginable solutions and no more: total annihilation; survival with our consciousness of to-day; survival without any sort of consciousness; lastly, survival in the universal consciousness, or with a consciousness different from that which we possess in this world.

2

Total annihilation is impossible. We are the prisoners of an infinity without outlet, wherein nothing perishes, wherein everything is dispersed, but nothing lost. Neither a body nor a thought can drop out of the universe, out of time and space. Not an atom of our flesh, not a quiver of our nerves will go where they will cease to be, for there is no place where anything ceases to be. The brightness of a star extinguished millions of years ago still wanders in the ether where our eyes will perhaps behold it this very night, pursuing its endless road.

It is the same with all that we see, as with all that we do not see. To be able to do away with a thing, that is to say, to fling it into nothingness, nothingness would have to exist; and, if it exists, under whatever form, it is no longer nothingness. As soon as we try to analyze it, to define it, or to understand it, thoughts and expressions fail us, or create that which they are struggling to deny. It is as contrary to the nature of our reason and probably of all imaginable reason to conceive nothingness as to conceive limits to infinity. Nothingness, besides, is but a negative infinity, a sort of infinity of darkness opposed to that which our intelligence strives to illumine, or rather it is but a child-name or nickname which our mind has bestowed upon that which it has not attempted to embrace, for we call nothingness all that escapes our senses or our reason and exists without our knowledge.

3

But, it will perhaps be said, though the annihilation of every world and every thing be impossible, it is not so certain that their death is impossible; and, to us, what is the difference between nothingness and everlasting death? Here again we are led astray by our imagination and by words. We can no more conceive death than we can conceive nothingness. We use the word death to cover those fragments of nothingness which we believe that we understand; but, on closer examination, we are bound to recognize that our idea of death is much too puerile for it to contain the least truth. It reaches no higher than our own bodies and cannot measure the destinies of the universe. We give the name of death to anything that has a life a little different from ours. Even so do we act toward a world that appears to us motionless and frozen,

the moon, for instance, because we are persuaded that any form of existence, animal or vegetable, is extinguished upon it for ever. But it is now some years since we learned that the most inert matter, to outward seeming, is animated by movements so powerful and furious that all animal or vegetable life is no more than sleep and immobility by the side of the swirling eddies and immeasurable energy locked up in a wayside stone.

"There is no room for death!" cried Emily Brontë.

But, even if, in the infinite series of the centuries, all matter should really become inert and motionless, it would none the less persist under one form or another; and persistence, though it were in total immobility, would, after all, be but a form of life stable and silent at last. All that dies falls into life; and all that is born is of the same age as that which dies. If death carried us

to nothingness, did birth then draw us out of that same nothingness? Why should the second be more impossible than the first? The higher human thought rises and the wider it expands, the less comprehensible do nothingness and death become. In any case—and this is what matters here—if nothingness were possible, since it could not be anything whatever, it could not be dreadful.

# CHAPTER III

## THE SURVIVAL OF OUR CONSCIOUSNESS

# CHAPTER III

## THE SURVIVAL OF OUR CONSCIOUSNESS

### I

NEXT comes survival with our consciousness of to-day. I have broached this question in an essay on *Immortality*,[1] of which I will only reproduce a few essential passages, restricting myself to supporting them with new considerations.

What composes this sense of the ego which turns each of us into the centre of the universe, the only point that matters in space and time? Is it formed of sensations of our body, or of thoughts independent of our body? Would our body be conscious of itself without our mind? And, on the

[1] This essay forms part of the volume published under the title of *The Measure of the Hours.—Translator's Note.*

other hand, what would our mind be without our body? We know bodies without mind, but no mind without a body. It is almost certain that an intelligence devoid of senses, devoid of organs to create and nourish it, exists; but it is impossible to imagine that ours could thus exist and yet remain similar to that which has derived all that inspires it from our sensibility.

This ego, as we conceive it when we reflect upon the consequences of its destruction, this ego, therefore, is neither our mind nor our body, since we recognize that both are waves that roll by and are incessantly renewed. Is it an immovable point, which could not be form or substance, for these are always in evolution, nor yet life, which is the cause or effect of form and substance? In truth, it is impossible for us either to apprehend or define it, or even to say where it dwells. When we try to go back to its last source, we find little more than a suc-

cession of memories, a mass of ideas, confused, for that matter, and unsettled, all connected with the same instinct, the instinct of living: a mass of habits of our sensibility and of conscious or unconscious reactions against the surrounding phenomena. When all is said, the most steadfast point of that nebula is our memory, which seems, on the other hand, to be a somewhat external, a somewhat accessory faculty and, in any case, one of the frailest faculties of our brain, one of those which disappear the most promptly at the least disturbance of our health. As an English poet has very truly said, "that which cries aloud for eternity is the very part of me that will perish."

2

It matters not: that uncertain, indiscernible, fleeting and precarious ego is so much the centre of our being, interests us so exclusively, that every reality disappears be-

fore this phantom. It is utterly indifferent to us that, throughout eternity, our body or its substance should know every joy and every glory, undergo the most splendid and delightful transformations, become flower, perfume, beauty, light, air, star—and it is certain that it does so become and that we must look for our dead not in our graveyards, but in space and light and life—it is likewise indifferent to us that our intelligence should expand until it takes part in the life of the worlds, until it understands and governs it. We are persuaded that all this will not affect us, will give us no pleasure, will not happen to ourselves, unless that memory of a few almost always insignificant facts accompany us and witness those unimaginable joys.

"I care not," says this narrow ego, in its firm resolve to understand nothing, "I care not if the loftiest, the freest, the fairest portions of my mind be eternally living and

radiant in the supreme gladness: they are no longer mine; I do not know them. Death has cut the network of nerves or memories that connected them with I know not what centres wherein lies the point which I feel to be my very self. They are thus set loose, floating in space and time; and their fate is as alien to me as that of the most distant stars. All that befalls has no existence for me unless I can recall it within that mysterious being which is I know not where and precisely nowhere and which I turn like a mirror about this world whose phenomena take shape only in so far as they are reflected in it."

3

Thus our longing for immortality destroys itself while expressing itself, since it is on one of the accessory and most transient parts of our whole life that we base all the interest of our after-life. It seems

to us that, if our existence be not continued with the greater part of its drawbacks, of the pettiness and blemishes that characterize it, nothing will distinguish it from that of other beings; that it will become a drop of ignorance in the ocean of the unknown; and that, thenceforth, all that may come to pass will no longer concern us.

What immortality can one promise to men who almost necessarily conceive it in this guise? What is the use of it? asks a puerile but profound instinct. Any immortality that does not drag with it through eternity, like the fetters of the convict that we were, the strange consciousness formed during a few years of movement, any immortality that does not bear that indelible mark of our identity is for us as though it were not. Most of the religions have been well aware of this and have reckoned with that instinct which desires and at the same time destroys the after-life. It is thus

that the Catholic Church, going back to the most primitive hopes, promises us not only the integral preservation of our earthly ego, but even the resurrection of our own flesh.

There lies the crux of the riddle. When we demand that this small consciousness, that this sense of a special ego—almost childish and, in any case, extraordinarily limited; probably an infirmity of our actual intelligence—should accompany us into the infinity of time in order that we may understand and enjoy it, are we not wishing to perceive an object with the aid of an organ which is not intended for that purpose? Are we not asking that our hand should discover the light or that our eye should appreciate perfumes? Are we not, rather, acting like a sick man who, in order to recognize himself, to be quite sure that he is himself, should think it necessary to continue his sickness in health and in the unending sequence of his days? The com-

parison, indeed, is more accurate than is the habit of comparisons. Picture a blind man who is also paralyzed and deaf. He has been in this condition from his birth and has just attained his thirtieth year. What can the hours have embroidered on the imageless web of this poor life? The unhappy man must have gathered at the back of his memory, for lack of other recollections, a few halting sensations of heat and cold, of weariness and rest, of more or less active physical sufferings, of hunger and thirst. It is probable that all human joys, all our hopes and ideals, all our dreams of paradise will be reduced for him to the vague sense of well-being that follows the alleviation of a pain. There you have the only possible equipment of that consciousness and that ego. The intellect, having never been invoked from without, will sleep soundly, all ignorant of itself. Nevertheless, the poor wretch will have his little life, to which he

will cling as closely and eagerly as though he were the happiest of men. He will dread death; and the idea of entering into eternity without carrying with him the emotions and the memories of his dark and silent sick-bed will plunge him into the same despair into which we are plunged by the thought of abandoning a glorious life of light and love for the icy darkness of the tomb.

4

Let us now suppose that a miracle suddenly quicken his eyes and ears and reveal to him, through the open window by his bedside, the dawn rising over the plain, the song of the birds in the trees, the murmur of the wind among the leaves and of the water lapping its banks, the echoing of human voices among the morning hills. Let us suppose also that the same miracle, completing its work, restore the use of his limbs. He rises, stretches his arms to that prodigy

which as yet for him possesses neither reality nor name: the light! He opens the door, staggers out amidst the effulgence; and his whole body is merged in the wonder of it all. He enters into an ineffable life, into a sky whereof no dream could have given him a foretaste; and, by a freak which is readily admissible in this sort of cure, health, introducing him to this inconceivable and unintelligible existence, wipes out in him all memory of days past.

What will be the state of this ego, of this central focus, the receptacle of all our sensations, the spot in which converges all that belongs in its own right to our life, the supreme point, the "egotic" point of our being, if I may venture to coin a word? Memory being abolished, will that ego recover within itself a few traces of the man that was? A new force, the intellect, awaking and suddenly displaying unprecedented activity, what relation will that in-

tellect keep up with the inert, dull germ whence it has sprung? Where, in his past, shall the man fix his moorings so that his identity may endure? And yet will there not survive within him some sense or instinct, independent of his memory, his intellect and I know not what other faculties, that will make him recognize that it is indeed in him that the liberating miracle has been wrought, that it is indeed his life and not his neighbour's, transformed, irrecognizable, but substantially the same, that has issued from the silence and the darkness to prolong itself in harmony and light? Can we picture the disorder, the wandering hither and thither of that bewildered consciousness? Have we any idea in what manner the ego of yesterday will unite with the ego of to-day and how the "egotic" point, the only point which we are anxious to preserve intact, will behave in that delirium and that upheaval?

Let us first endeavour to reply with sufficient precision to this question which comes within the province of our actual and visible life; for, if we are unable to do this, how can we hope to solve the other problem that stares every man in the face at the hour of death?

5

This sensitive point, in which the whole problem is summed up—for it is the only one in question; and, except in so far as it is concerned, immortality is certain—this mysterious point, to which, in the presence of death, we attach so high a value, we lose, strange to say, at any moment in life without feeling the least anxiety. Not only is it destroyed nightly in our sleep, but even in waking it is at the mercy of a host of accidents. A wound, a shock, an illness, a little alcohol, a little opium, a little smoke are enough to affect it. Even when nothing im-

pairs it, it is not uniformly perceptible. An effort is often necessary, a deliberate looking into ourselves, before we can recover it and become aware of some particular event. At the least distraction, a joy passes by us without touching us, without giving up the pleasure which it contains. One would say that the functions of that organ by which we taste and know life are intermittent and that the presence of our ego, except in pain, is but a rapid and perpetual sequence of departures and returns. What reassures us is that we think ourselves certain to find it intact on waking, after the wound, the shock or the distraction, whereas we are persuaded, so fragile do we feel it to be, that it is bound to disappear for ever in the awful impact between life and death.

## 6

One foremost truth, pending others which the future will no doubt reveal, is

that, in these questions of life and death, our imagination has remained very childish. Almost every elsewhere, it is ahead of reason; but here it still loiters over the games of infancy. It surrounds itself with the barbaric dreams and longings wherewith it cradled the hopes and fears of cave-dwelling man. It asks for things that are impossible because they are too small. It clamours for privileges which, if obtained, were more to be dreaded than the most enormous disasters with which nihility threatens us. Can we think without shuddering of an eternity contained wholly within our paltry present-day consciousness? And behold how, in all this, we obey the illogical whims of fancy which men in the olden time called *la folle du logis*. Which of us, if he were to go to sleep to-night in the scientific certainty of awaking in a hundred years exactly as he is to-day, with his body intact, even on condition that he lost

all memory of his previous life—would such memories not be useless?—which of us would not welcome that age-long sleep with the same confidence as the brief, gentle slumbers of his every night? And yet between real death and this sleep there would be only the difference of that awakening deferred for a century, an awakening as alien to the sleeper as the birth of a posthumous child would be.

Or else, to say very much what Schopenhauer said to one who was unwilling to admit an immortality into which he would not carry his consciousness:

"Suppose that, to snatch you from some intolerable suffering, you were promised an awakening and a return to consciousness after a wholly unconscious sleep of three months?"

"I would accept it gladly."

"But suppose that, at the end of the three months, they forgot you and did not wake

you until ten thousand years had passed, how much the wiser would you be? And, sleep once begun, what difference does it make to you whether it last for three months or for ever?"

7

Let us then consider that all that composes our consciousness comes first of all from our body. Our mind does but organize that which is supplied by our senses; and even the images and the words—which in reality are but images—by the aid of which it strives to sever itself from those senses and deny their sway are borrowed from them. How could that mind remain what it was, when it has nothing left of that which formed it? When our mind no longer has a body, what shall it carry with it into infinity whereby to recognize itself, seeing that it knows itself only by favour of that body? A few memories of their

common life? Will those memories, which were already fading in this world, suffice to separate it for ever from the rest of the universe, in boundless space and in unlimited time?

"But," I shall be told, "there is more in us than our intelligence discovers. We have many things within us which our senses have not placed there; we contain a greater being than the one we know."

That is probable, nay, certain: the share occupied by the inconscient, that is to say, by that which represents the universe, is enormous and preponderant. But how shall the ego which we know and whose destiny alone concerns us recognize all those things and that greater being neither of which it has ever known? What will it do in the presence of that stranger? If I be told that the stranger is myself, I will readily agree; but was that which upon earth felt and weighed my joys and sorrows and gave

birth to the few memories and thoughts that remain to me, was that this impassive, unseen stranger who existed in me all unsuspected, even as I am probably about to live in him without his concerning himself with a presence that will bring him but the sorry recollection of a thing that has ceased to be? Now that he has taken my place, while destroying, in order to acquire a larger consciousness, all that formed my small consciousness here below, is it not another life commencing, a life whose joys and sorrows will pass above my head, not even brushing with their new-born wings the being which I am conscious of to-day?

8

Lastly, how shall we explain that, in that consciousness which ought to survive us, the infinity that precedes our birth has left no trace? Had we no consciousness in that infinity, or did we perchance lose it on

coming into the world and did the catastrophe that produces the whole terror of death take place at the moment of our birth? None can deny that this infinity has the same rights over us as that which follows our decease. We are as much the children of the first as of the second; and we must of necessity have a part in both. If you maintain that you will always exist, you are bound to admit that you have always existed; we cannot imagine the one without having to imagine the other. If nothing ends, nothing begins, for any such beginning will be the end of something. Now, although I have existed since all time, I have no consciousness whatever of my previous existence, whereas I shall have to carry to the boundless horizon of the endless ages the tiny consciousness acquired during the instant that elapses between my birth and my death. Can my true ego, then, which is about to become eternal, date only

from my short sojourn on this earth? And all the preceding eternity, which is of exactly the same value as that which follows, since it is the same, shall is not count? Will it be flung into nihility? Why is a strange privilege accorded to a few meaningless days spent on an unimportant planet? Is it because in that previous eternity we had no consciousness? What do we know about it? It seems very unlikely. Why should the acquisition of consciousness be a phenomenon unrepeated in an eternity that had at its disposal innumerable billions of chances, among which—unless we set a limit to the infinity of the ages—it is impossible to conceive that the thousands of coincidences which went to form my present consciousness did not occur over and over again? The moment we turn our gaze upon the mysteries of that eternity wherein all that happens must already have happened, it seems much more credible, on

the contrary, that we have had consciousness upon consciousness which our life of to-day hides from our view. If they have existed and if, at our death, one consciousness must survive, the others must survive as well, for there is no reason to bestow so disproportionate a favour upon that consciousness which we have acquired here below. And, if all of them survive and awaken at the same time, what will become of the petty consciousness of a few terrestrial moments, when it is submerged in those eternal existences? Besides, even if it were to forget all its previous existences, what would become of it amid the perpetual buffeting, the endless wash of its posthumous eternity? For it is but as a poor sand-drift of an island in the unrelenting jaws of two boundless oceans. It would hold its own there, puny and so precarious, only on condition that it acquired nothing more, that it remained for ever closed, isolated

and confined, impenetrable and insensible to all things, in the midst of the astounding mysteries, the fabulous treasures and visions which it would have eternally to pass through without ever seeing or hearing anything; and that surely would be the worst death and the worst destiny that could befall us. We are, therefore, driven on all sides toward the theories of an universal consciousness or of a modified consciousness, both of which we shall examine presently.

# CHAPTER IV

## THE THEOSOPHICAL HYPOTHESIS

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### I

BUT, before broaching those questions, it were perhaps well to study two interesting solutions of the problem of personal survival, solutions which, although not new, have at least been lately renewed. I refer to the neotheosophical and neospiritualistic theories, which are, I think, the only ones that can be seriously discussed. The first is almost as old as man himself; but a popular movement, of some magnitude in certain countries, has rejuvenated the doctrine of reincarnation, or the transmigration of souls, and brought it once more into prominence. It cannot be denied

that, of all the religious theories, reincarnation is the most plausible and the least repellent to our reason. Nor must we overlook that it has on its side the authority of the most ancient and widespread religions, those which have incontestably furnished humanity with the greatest aggregate of wisdom and which we have not yet exhausted of their truths and mysteries. In reality, the whole of Asia, whence we derive almost everything which we know, has always believed and still believes in the transmigration of souls.

As Mrs. Annie Besant, the remarkable apostle of the new theosophy, very rightly says:

"There is no philosophical doctrine which has behind it so magnificent an intellectual ancestry as the doctrine of reincarnation; none for which there is such a weight of the opinion of the wisest of men; none, as Max Müller declared, on which the greatest

philosophers of humanity have been so thoroughly in accord."

This is all quite true. But it would need other proofs to win our distrustful faith to-day. I have sought in vain for a single one in the leading works of our modern theosophists. They confine themselves to a mere reiteration of dogmatic statements, which are of the vaguest. Their great argument—the chief and, when all is said, the only argument which they adduce—is but a sentimental argument. Their doctrine that the soul, in its successive existences, is purified and exalted with more or less rapidity according to its efforts and deserts is, they maintain, the only one that satisfies the irresistible instinct of justice which we bear within us. They are right; and, from this point of view, their posthumous justice is immeasurably superior to that of the barbaric Heaven and the monstrous Hell of the Christians, where rewards and punishments

are for ever meted out to virtues and vices which are for the most part puerile, unavoidable or accidental. But this, I repeat, is only a sentimental argument, which has but an infinitesimal value in the scale of evidence.

2

We may admit that certain of their theories are rather ingenious; and what they say of the part played by the "shells," for instance, or the "elementals," in the spiritualistic phenomena, is worth about as much as our clumsy explanations of fluidic and supersensible bodies. Perhaps, or even no doubt, they are right when they insist that everything around us is full of living, sentient forms, of diverse and innumerous types, "as different from one another as a blade of grass and a tiger, or a tiger and a man," which are incessantly brushing against us and through which we pass un-

awares. If all the religions have overpopulated the world with invisible beings, we have perhaps depopulated it too completely; and it is extremely possible that we shall find one day that the mistake was not on the side which one imagines. As Sir William Crookes so well puts it, in a remarkable passage:

"It is not improbable that other sentient beings have organs of sense which do not respond to some or any of the rays to which our eyes are sensitive, but are able to appreciate other vibrations to which we are blind. Such beings would practically be living in a different world to our own. Imagine, for instance, what idea we should form of surrounding objects were we endowed with eyes not sensitive to the ordinary rays of light, but sensitive to the vibrations concerned in electric and magnetic phenomena. Glass and crystal would be among the most opaque of bodies. Metals

would be more or less transparent, and a telegraph wire through the air would look like a long narrow hole drilled through an impervious solid body. A dynamo in active work would resemble a conflagration, whilst a permanent magnet would realize the dream of mediæval mystics and become an everlasting lamp with no expenditure of energy or consumption of fuel."

All this, with so many other things which they assert, would be, if not admissible, at least worthy of attention, if those suppositions were offered for what they are, that is to say, very ancient hypotheses that go back to the early ages of human theology and metaphysics; but, when they are transformed into categorical and dogmatic assertions, they at once become untenable. Their exponents promise us, on the other hand, that, by exercising our minds, by refining our senses, by etherealizing our bodies, we shall be able to live with those whom we

call dead and with the higher beings that surround us. It all seems to lead to nothing much and rests on very frail bases, on very vague proofs derived from hypnotic sleep, presentiments, mediumism, phantasms and so forth. It is rather surprising that those who call themselves "clairvoyants," who pretend to be in communication with this world of discarnate spirits and with other worlds still nearer to the divine, should bring us no evidential proofs. We want something more than arbitrary theories about the "immortal triad," the "three worlds," the "astral body," the "permanent atom," or the "Karma-Loka." As their sensibility is keener, their perception subtler, their spiritual intuition more penetrating than ours, why do they not choose as a field for investigation the phenomena of prenatal memory, for instance, to take one subject at random from a multitude of others, phenomena which,

although sporadic and open to question, are still admissible? We are only too eager to allow ourselves to be convinced, for all that adds anything to man's importance, range or duration must needs be gladly welcomed.[1]

[1] To learn the precise truth about the neotheosophical movement and its first manifestations, the reader should study the striking report drawn up, after an impartial, but strict inquiry, by Dr. Hodgson, who was sent to India for this special purpose by the Society for Psychical Research. In it he unveils, in a masterly fashion, the obvious and often clumsy impositions of the famous Mme. Blavatsky and the whole neotheosophical organization (*Proceedings,* Vol. III, pp. 201-400: *Hodgson's Report on Phenomena connected with Theosophy*).

# CHAPTER V

## THE NEOSPIRITUALISTIC HYPOTHESIS: APPARITIONS

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## THE NEOSPIRITUALISTIC HYPOTHESIS: APPARITIONS

### I

OUTSIDE theosophy, investigations of a purely scientific nature have been made in the baffling regions of survival and reincarnation. Neospiritualism, or psychicism or experimental spiritualism, had its origin in America in 1870. In the following year, the first strictly scientific experiments were organized by Sir William Crookes, the man of genius who opened up most of the roads at the end of which men were astounded to discover unknown properties and conditions of matter; and, as early as 1873 or 1874, he obtained, with the aid of the medium Florence Cook, phe-

nomena of materialization that have hardly been surpassed. But the real inauguration of the new science dates from the foundation of the Society for Psychical Research, familiarly known as the S.P.R. This society was formed in London, twenty-eight years ago, under the auspices of the most distinguished men of science in England, and has, as we know, made a methodical and strict study of every case of supernormal psychology and sensibility. This study or investigation, originally conducted by Edmund Gurney, F. W. H. Myers and Frank Podmore and continued by their successors, is a masterpiece of scientific patience and conscientiousness. Not an incident is admitted that is not supported by unimpeachable testimony, by definite written records and convincing corroboration; in a word, it is hardly possible to contest the essential veracity of the majority of them, unless we begin by making up our minds to deny any

positive value to human evidence and by making any conviction, any certainty impossible that derives its source therefrom.[1] Among those supernormal manifestations, telepathy, telergy, previsions and so forth, we will take cognizance only of those which relate to life beyond the grave. They can be divided into two categories: (1) real, objective and spontaneous apparitions, or direct manifestations; (2) manifestations obtained by the agency of mediums, whether induced apparitions, which we will put aside for the moment because of their frequently questionable character,[2] or communications

[1] How strict these investigations are is shown by the perpetual attacks on the S.P.R. in the spiritualistic press, which constantly refers to it as the Society "for the suppression of facts," "for the wholesale imputation of imposture," "for the discouragement of the sensitive and for the repudiation of every revelation of the kind which was said to be pressing itself upon humanity from the regions of light and knowledge."

[2] It would, however, be unjust to assert that all these apparitions are open to question. For instance, it is impossible to deny the reality of the celebrated Katie King, the double of Florence Cook, whose actions and movements were rigorously investigated and controlled by a man like Sir William Crookes for a period of three years. But, looked upon as a proof of survival—

with the dead by word of mouth or automatic writing. We will stop for a moment to consider those extraordinary communications. They have been studied at length by such men as F. W. H. Myers, Richard Hodgson, Sir Oliver Lodge and the philosopher William James, the father of the new pragmatism; they profoundly impressed and almost convinced these men; and they therefore deserve to arrest our attention.

2

As concerns the manifestations of the first category, it is, of course, impossible to give even a summary account of the most strik-

notwithstanding that Katie King professed to be a dead person who had returned to earth to expiate certain sins—her manifestations are not so valuable as the communications obtained since her time. In any case, they bring us no revelation concerning existence beyond the grave; and Katie, who was so young, so much alive, whose pulsations could be counted, whose heart was heard beating, who was photographed, who distributed locks of her hair to those present, who replied to every question put to her, Katie herself never uttered a word on the subject of the secrets of the next world.

ing of them in these pages; and I refer the reader to the volumes of the *Proceedings*. It is enough to remember that numerous apparitions of deceased persons have been investigated and studied by men of science like Sir William Crookes, Alfred Russell Wallace, Robert Dale Owen, Professor Aksakof, Paul Gibier and others. Gurney, who is one of the classics of this new science, gives two hundred and thirty instances of this sort; and, since then, the *Journal* of the S.P.R. and the spiritualistic reviews have never ceased to record new ones. It appears therefore to be as well established as a fact can be that a spiritual or nervous shape, an image, a belated reflexion of life, is capable of subsisting for some time, of releasing itself from the body, of surviving it, of traversing enormous distances in the twinkling of an eye, of manifesting itself to the living and, sometimes, of communicating with them.

For the rest, we have to recognize that these apparitions are very brief. They only take place at the precise moment of death or follow very shortly after. They do not seem to have the least consciousness of a new or superterrestrial life differing from that of the body whence they issue. On the contrary, their spiritual energy, at a time when it ought to be absolutely pure, because it is rid of matter, seems greatly inferior to what it was when matter surrounded it. These more or less uneasy phantasms, often tormented with trivial cares, have never, although they come from another world, brought us one single revelation of topical interest concerning that world whose prodigious threshold they have crossed. Soon, they fade away and disappear for ever. Are they the first glimmers of a new existence or the final glimmers of the old? Do the dead thus use, for want of a better, the last link that binds them and makes

them perceptible to our senses? Do they afterwards go on living around us, without again succeeding, in spite of their endeavours, in making themselves known or giving us an idea of their presence, because we have not the organ that is necessary to perceive them, even as all our endeavours would not succeed in giving a man who was blind from birth the least notion of light and colour? We do not know at all; nor can we tell whether it be permissible to draw any conclusion from all these incontestable phenomena. They would really assume importance only if it were possible to verify or to induce apparitions of beings whose death dated back a certain number of years. We should then at last have the positive proof, which has always escaped us hitherto, that the spirit is independent of the body, that it is cause, not effect, that it can thrive, find sustenance and perform its functions without organs. The greatest question that

humanity has ever set itself would thus be, if not solved, at least rid of some of its obscurity; and, forthwith, personal survival, while continuing to be wrapped in the mysteries of the beginning and the end, would become defensible. But we have not yet reached that stage. Meanwhile, it is interesting to observe that there really are ghosts, spectres and phantoms. Once again, science steps in to confirm a general belief of mankind and to teach us that a belief of this sort, however absurd it may at first seem, still deserves careful examination.

# CHAPTER VI

## COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE DEAD

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## COMMUNICATION WITH THE DEAD

### I

THE spiritualists communicate or think that they communicate with the dead by means of what they call automatic speech and writing. These are obtained by the agency of a medium[1] in a state of ecstasy or

[1] Those who take up the study of these supernormal manifestations usually ask themselves:

"Why mediums? Why make use of these often questionable and always inadequate intermediaries?"

The reason is that, hitherto, no way has been discovered of doing without them. If we admit the spiritualistic theory, the discarnate spirits which surround us on every side and which are separated from us by the impenetrable and mysterious wall of death seek, in order to communicate with us, the line of least resistance between the two worlds and find it in the medium, without our knowing why, even as we do not know why an electric current passes along copper wire and is stopped by glass or porcelain. If, on the other hand, we admit the telepathic hypothesis, which is the more probable, we observe that the thoughts, intentions or suggestions transmitted are, in the majority of cases, not conveyed from one subconscious intelligence to another. There is need of an organism that is, at the

rather of "trance," to employ the vocabulary of the new science. This condition is not one of hypnotic sleep, nor does it seem to be an hysterical manifestation; it is often associated, as in the case of the medium Mrs. Piper, with perfect health and complete intellectual and physical balance. It is rather the more or less voluntary emergence of a second or subliminal personality or consciousness of the medium; or, if we admit the spiritualistic hypothesis, his occupation, his "psychic invasion," as Myers calls it, by forces from another world. In the "entranced" subject, the normal consciousness and personality are entirely done

came time, a receiver and a transmitter; and this organism is found in the medium. Why? Once more, we know absolutely nothing about it, even as we do not know why one body or combination of bodies is sensitive to concentric waves in wireless telegraphy, while another is not affected by it. We here grope, as, for that matter, we grope almost everywhere, in the obscure domain of undisputed, but inexplicable facts. Those who care to possess more precise notions on the theory of mediumism will do well to read the admirable address delivered by Sir William Crookes, as president of the S.P.R., on the 29th of January, 1897.

away with; and he replies "automatically," sometimes by word of mouth, more often in writing, to the questions put to him. It has happened that he speaks and writes simultaneously, his voice being occupied by one spirit and his hand by another, who thus carry on two independent conversations. More rarely, the voice and the two hands are "possessed" at one and the same time; and we receive three different communications. Obviously, manifestations of this sort lend themselves to frauds and impostures of every kind; and the distrust aroused is at first invincible. But there are some that make their appearance encompassed with such guarantees of good faith and sincerity, so often, so long and so rigorously checked by scientific men of unimpeachable character and authority and of originally inflexible scepticism that it becomes difficult to maintain a suspicion at

the finish.[1] Unfortunately, I am not able to enter here into the details of some of these purely scientific sittings, those, for instance, of Mrs. Piper, the famous medium with whom F. W. H. Myers, Richard Hodgson, Professor Newbold, of the Uni-

[1] These questions of fraud and imposture are naturally the first that suggest themselves when we begin to study these phenomena. But the slightest acquaintance with the life, habits and proceedings of the three or four great mediums of whom we are going to speak is quite sufficient to remove even the faintest shadow of suspicion. Of all the explanations conceivable, that one which attributes everything to imposture and trickery is unquestionably the most extraordinary and the least probable. Moreover, by reading Richard Hodgson's report, entitled *Observations of Certain Phenomena of Trance* (*Proceedings,* Vols. VIII. and XIII.; and also J. H. Hyslop's report, Vol. XVI.), we can observe the precautions taken, even to the extent of employing special detectives, to make certain that Mrs. Piper, for instance, was unable, normally and humanly speaking, to have any knowledge of the facts which she revealed. I repeat, from the moment that one enters upon this study, all suspicions are dispelled without leaving a trace behind them; and we are soon convinced that the key to the riddle must not be sought in imposture. All the manifestations of the dumb, mysterious and oppressed personality that lies concealed in every one of us have to undergo the same ordeal in their turn; and those which relate to the divining-rod, to name no others, are at this moment passing through the same crisis of incredulity. Less than fifty years ago, the majority of the hypnotic phenomena which are now scientifically classified were likewise looked upon as fraudulent. It seems that man is loth to admit that there lie within him many more things than he imagined.

versity of Pennsylvania, Sir Oliver Lodge and William James worked during a number of years. On the other hand, it is precisely the accumulation and coincidences of these abnormal details which gradually produce and confirm the conviction that we are in the presence of an entirely new, improbable, but genuine phenomenon, which is sometimes difficult of classification among exclusively terrestrial phenomena. I should have to devote to these "communications" a special study which would exceed the limits of this essay; and I will therefore content myself with referring those who care to know more of the subject to Sir Oliver Lodge's book, *The Survival of Man,* recently translated into French under the title of *La Survivance humaine;* and, above all, to the twenty-five bulky volumes of the *Proceedings* of the S.P.R., notably to the report and comments of William James on the Piper-Hodgson sittings in Vol. XXIII. and

to Vol. XIII., where Hodgson examines the facts and arguments that may be adduced for or against the agency of the dead; and, lastly, to Myers' great work, *Human Personality and its Survival after Bodily Death.*

2

The "entranced" mediums are invaded or possessed by different familiar spirits, to whom the new science gives the somewhat inappropriate and ambiguous name of "controls." Thus, Mrs. Piper is visited in succession by Phinuit, George Pelham, or "G.P.," Imperator, Doctor and Rector. Mrs. Thompson, another very celebrated medium, has Nelly for her usual tenant, while graver and more illustrious personages would take possession of Stainton Moses, the clergyman. Each of these spirits retains a sharply defined character, which is consistent throughout and which,

moreover, for the most part, bears no relation to that of the medium. Amongst these, Phinuit and Nelly are undoubtedly the most attractive, the most original, the most living, the most active and, above all, the most talkative. They centralize the communications after a fashion; they come and go officiously; and, should any one of those present wish to be brought into touch with the soul of a deceased kinsman or friend, they fly in search of it, find it amid the invisible throng, usher it in, announce its presence, speak in its name, transmit and, so to speak, translate the questions and replies; for it seems that it is very difficult for the dead to communicate with the living and that they need special aptitudes and a concurrence of extraordinary circumstances. We will not yet examine what they have to reveal to us; but to see them thus fluttering to and fro amid the multitude of their discarnate brothers and sis-

ters gives us a first impression of the next world which is none too reasurring; and we say to ourselves that the dead of to-day are strangely like those whom Ulysses conjured up out of the Cimmerian darkness three thousand years ago: pale and empty shades, bewildered, incoherent, puerile and terror-stricken, like unto dreams, more numerous than the leaves that fall in autumn and like them, trembling in the unknown winds from the vast plains of the other world. They no longer even have enough life to be unhappy and seem to drag out, we know not where, a precarious and idle existence, to wander aimlessly, to hover round us, slumbering or chattering among one another of the minor matters of the world; and, when a gap is made in their darkness, to come up in haste from all sides, like flocks of famished birds, hungering for light and the sound of a human voice. And, in spite of ourselves, we think of the

*Odyssey* and the sinister words of the shade of Achilles as it issued from Erebus:

"Do not, O illustrious Ulysses, speak to me of death; I would wish, being on earth, to serve for hire with another man of no estate, who had not much livelihood, rather than rule over all the departed dead."

3

What have these latter-day dead to tell us? To begin with, it is a remarkable thing that they appear to be much more interested in events here below than in those of the world wherein they move. They seem, above all, jealous to establish their identity, to prove that they still exist, that they recognize us, that they know everything; and, to convince us of this, they enter into the most minute and forgotten details with extraordinary precision, perspicacity and prolixity. They are also extremely clever at unravelling the intricate family connections of the

person actually questioning them, of any of the sitters, or even of a stranger entering the room. They recall this one's little infirmities, that one's maladies, the eccentricities or tendencies of a third. They have cognizance of events taking place at a distance: they see, for instance, and describe to their hearers in London an insignificant episode in Canada. In a word, they say and do more or less all the disconcerting and inexplicable things that are sometimes obtained from a first-rate medium; perhaps they even go a little further; but there comes from it all no breath, no glimmer of the hereafter, not even the something vaguely promised and vaguely waited for.

We shall be told that the mediums are visited only by inferior spirits, incapable of tearing themselves from earthly cares and soaring toward greater and loftier ideas. It is possible; and no doubt we are wrong to believe that a spirit stripped of its body can

suddenly be transformed and reach, in a moment, the level of our imaginings; but could they not at least inform us where they are, what they feel and what they do?

4

And now it seems that death itself has elected to answer these objections. Frederic Myers, Richard Hodgson and William James, who so often, for long and ardent hours, questioned Mrs. Piper and Mrs. Thompson, and obliged the departed to speak by their mouths, are now themselves among the shades, on the other side of the curtain of darkness. They at least knew exactly what to do in order to reach us, what to reveal in order to allay men's uneasy curiosity. Myers in particular, the most ardent, the most convinced, the most impatient of the veil that parted him from the eternal realities, formally promised those who were continuing his work that he would make

every imaginable effort out yonder, in the unknown, to come to their aid in a decisive fashion. He kept his word. A month after his death, when Sir Oliver Lodge was questioning Mrs. Thompson in her trance, Nelly, the medium's familiar spirit, suddenly declared that she had seen Myers, that he was not yet fully awake, but that he hoped to come, at nine o'clock in the evening, and "communicate" with his old friend of the Psychical Society.

The sitting was suspended and resumed at half-past eight; and Myers' "communication" was at last obtained. He was recognized by the first few words he spoke; it was really he; he had not changed. Faithful to his idiosyncracy when on earth, he at once insisted on the necessity for taking notes. But he seemed dazed. They spoke to him of the Society for Psychical Research, the sole interest of his life. He had lost all recollection of it. Then mem-

ory gradually revived; and there followed a quantity of post-mortem gossip on the subject of the society's next president, the obituary articles in the *Times,* the letters that should be published, and so on. He complained that people would not let him rest, that there was not a place in England where they did not ask for him:

"Call Myers! Bring Myers!"

He ought to be given time to collect himself, to reflect. He also complained of the difficulty of conveying his ideas through the mediums: "they were translating like a schoolboy does his first lines of Virgil."[1] As for his present condition, "he groped his way as if through passages, before he knew he was dead. He thought he had lost his way in a strange town . . . and, even when he saw people that he knew were dead, he thought they were only visions."

[1] In this and other "communications," I have quoted actual English words employed, wherever I have been able to discover them.—*Translator.*

This, together with more chatter of a no less trivial nature, is about all that was obtained from Myers' "control" or "impersonation," of which better things had been expected. The "communication" and many others which, it appears, recall in a striking fashion Myers' habits, character and ways of thinking and speaking, would possess some value if none of those by whom or to whom they were made had been acquainted with him at the time when he was still numbered among the living. As they stand, they are most probably but reminiscences of a secondary personality of the medium or unconscious suggestions of the questioner or the sitters.

5

A more important communication and a more perplexing, because of the names connected with it, is that which is known as "Mrs. Piper's Hodgson-Control." Pro-

fessor William James devotes an account of over a hundred and twenty pages to it in Vol. XXIII. of the *Proceedings*. Dr. Hodgson, in his lifetime, was secretary of the American branch of the S.P.R., of which William James was vice-president. For many years, he devoted himself to the medium Mrs. Piper, working with her twice a week and thus accumulating an enormous mass of documents on the subject of posthumous manifestations, a mass whose wealth has not yet been exhausted. Like Myers, he had promised to come back after his death; and, in his jovial way, he had more than once declared to Mrs. Piper that, when he came to visit her in his turn, as he had more experience than the other spirits, the sittings would take a more decisive turn and that "he would make it hot for them." He did come back, a week after his death, and manifested himself by automatic writing (which, with Mrs. Piper as medium,

was the most usual method of communication) during several sittings at which William James was present. I should like to give an idea of these manifestations. But, as the celebrated Harvard professor very truly observes, the shorthand report of a sitting of this kind at once alters its aspect from start to finish. We seek in vain for the emotion experienced on thus finding one's self in the presence of an invisible but living being, who not only answers your questions, but anticipates your thoughts, understands before you have finished speaking, grasps an allusion and caps it with another allusion, grave or smiling. The life of the dead man, which, during a strange hour, had, so to speak, surrounded and penetrated you, seems to be extinguished for the second time. Stenography, which is devoid of all emotion, no doubt supplies the best elements for arriving at a logical conclusion; but it is not certain that here, as in

many other cases where the unknown predominates, logic is the only road that leads to the truth.

"When I first undertook," says William James, "to collate this series of sittings and make the present report, I supposed that my verdict would be determined by pure logic. Certain minute incidents, I thought, ought to make for spirit-return or against it in a 'crucial' way. But watching my mind work as it goes over the data convinces me that exact logic plays only a preparatory part in shaping our conclusions here; and that the decisive vote, if there be one, has to be cast by what I may call one's general sense of dramatic probability, which sense ebbs and flows from one hypothesis to another—it does so in the present writer, at least—in a rather illogical manner. If one sticks to the detail, one may draw an anti-spiritist conclusion; if one thinks more of

what the whole mass may signify, one may well incline to spiritist interpretations."[1]

And, at the end of his article, he sums up in the following words:

*"I myself feel as if an external will to communicate were probably there,* that is, I find myself doubting, in consequence of my whole acquaintance with that sphere of phenomena, that Mrs. Piper's dream-life, even equipped with 'telepathic' powers, accounts for all the results found. But if asked whether the will to communicate be Hodgson's, or be some mere spirit-counterfeit of Hodgson's, I remain uncertain and await more facts, facts which may not point clearly to a conclusion for fifty or a hundred years."[2]

As we see, William James is inclined to waver; and at certain points in his account he appears to waver still more and indeed to say deliberately that the spirits "have a

[1] *Proceedings,* Vol. XXIII., p. 33.
[2] *Proceedings,* Vol. XXIII., p. 120.

finger in the pie." These hesitations on the part of a man who has revolutionized our psychological ideas and who possessed a brain as wonderfully organized and well balanced as that of our own Taine, for instance, are very significant. As a doctor of medicine and a professor of philosophy, sceptical by nature and scrupulously faithful to experimental methods, he was thrice qualified to conduct investigations of this kind to a successful conclusion. It is not a question of allowing ourselves, in our turn, to be unduly influenced by those hesitations; but, in any case, they show that the problem is a serious one, the gravest, perhaps, if the facts were beyond dispute, which we have had to solve since the coming of Christ; and that we must not expect to dismiss it with a shrug or a laugh.

6

I am obliged, for lack of space, to refer those who wish to form an opinion of their

own on the "Piper-Hodgson" case to the text of the *Proceedings*. The case, at the same time, is far from being one of the most striking; it should rather be classed, were it not for the importance of the sitters concerned, among the minor successes of the Piper series. Hodgson, according to the invariable custom of the spirits, is, first of all, bent on making himself recognized; and the inevitable and tedious string of trifling reminiscences begins twenty times over again and fills page after page. As usual in such instances, the recollections common to both the questioner and the spirit who is supposed to reply are brought out in their most circumstantial, their most insignificant and also their most private details with astonishing eagerness, precision and vivacity. And observe that, for all these details, which he discloses with such extraordinary facility, the dead man speaking goes by preference, one would say, to the most

hidden and forgotten treasures of the living listener's memory. He spares him nothing; he harps on everything with childish satisfaction and apprehensive solicitude, not so much to persuade others as to prove to himself that he still exists. And the obstinacy of this poor, invisible being, in striving to manifest himself through the hitherto uncrannied doors that separate us from our eternal destinies, is at once ridiculous and tragic:

"Do you remember, William, when we were in the country at So-and-so's, that game we played with the children; do you remember my saying such-and-such a thing when I was in that room where there was such-and-such a chair or table?"

"Why, yes, Hodgson, I do remember now."

"A good test, that?"

"First-rate, Hodgson!"

And so on, indefinitely. Sometimes there

is a more significant incident that seems to surpass the mere transmission of subliminal thought. They are talking, for instance, of a frustrated marriage which was always surrounded with great mystery, even to Hodgson's most intimate friends:

"Do you remember a lady-doctor in New York, a member of our society?"

"No, but what about her?"

"Her husband's name was Blair . . . I think."

"Do you mean Dr. Blair Thaw?"

"Oh, yes. Ask Mrs. Thaw if I did not at a dinner-party mention something about the lady. I may have done so."

James writes to Mrs. Thaw, who declares that, as a matter of fact, fifteen years before, Hodgson had said to her that he had just proposed to a girl and been refused. Mrs. Thaw and Dr. Newbold were the only people in the world who knew the particulars.

But to come to the further sittings. Among other points discussed is the financial position of the American branch of the S.P.R., a position which, at the death of the secretary, or rather factotum, Hodgson, was anything but brilliant. And behold the somewhat strange spectacle of different members of the society debating its affairs with their defunct secretary. Shall they dissolve? Shall they amalgamate? Shall they send the materials collected, most of which are Hodgson's, to England? They consult the dead man; he replies, gives good advice, seems fully aware of all the complications, all the difficulties. One day, in Hodgson's lifetime, when the society was found to be short of funds, an anonymous donor had sent the sum necessary to relieve it from embarrassment. Hodgson alive did not know who the donor was; Hodgson dead picks him out among those present, addresses him by name and thanks him pub-

licly. On another occasion, Hodgson, like all the spirits, complains of the extreme difficulty which he finds in conveying his thought through the alien organism of the medium:

"I find now difficulties such as a blind man would experience in trying to find his hat," he says.

But when, after so much idle chatter, William James at last puts the essential questions that burn our lips—"Hodgson, what have you to tell us about the other life?"—the dead man becomes shifty and does nothing but seek evasions:

"It is not a vague fantasy, but a reality," he replies.

"But," Mrs. William James insists, "do you live as we do, as men do?"

"What does she say?" asks the spirit, pretending not to understand.

"Do you live as men do?" repeats William James.

"Do you wear clothing and live in houses?" adds his wife.

"Oh, yes, houses, but not clothing. No, that is absurd. Just wait a moment, I am going to get out."

"You will come back again?"

"Yes."

"He has got to go out and get his breath," remarks another spirit, named Rector, suddenly intervening.

It has not been a waste of time, perhaps, to reproduce the general features of one of these sittings which may be regarded as typical. I will add, in order to give an idea of the farthest point which it is possible to attain, the following instance of an experiment made by Sir Oliver Lodge and related by him. He handed Mrs. Piper, in her "trance," a gold watch which had just been sent him by one of his uncles and which belonged to that uncle's twin brother, who had died twenty years before. When the

watch was in her possession, Mrs. Piper, or rather Phinuit, one of her familiar spirits, began to relate a host of details concerning the childhood of this twin brother, facts dating back for more than sixty-six years and of course unknown to Sir Oliver Lodge. Soon after, the surviving uncle, who lived in another town, wrote and confirmed the accuracy of most of these details, which he had quite forgotten and of which he was only now reminded by the medium's revelations; while those which he could not recollect at all were subsequently declared to be in accordance with fact by a third uncle, an old sea-captain, who lived in Cornwall and who had not the least notion why such strange questions were put to him.

I quote this instance not because it has any exceptional or decisive value, but simply, I repeat, by way of an example; for, like the case connected with Mrs. Thaw, mentioned above, it marks pretty exactly the

extreme points to which people have up to now, thanks to spirit agency, penetrated the mysteries of the unknown. It is well to add that cases in which the supposed limits of the most far-reaching telepathy are so manifestly exceeded are fairly uncommon.

## 7

Now, what are we to think of all this? Must we, with Myers, Newbold, Hyslop, Hodgson and so many others, who studied this problem at length, conclude in favour of the incontestable agency of forces and intelligences returning from the farther bank of the great river which it was deemed that none might cross? Must we acknowledge with them that there are cases ever more numerous which make it impossible for us to hesitate any longer between the telepathic hypothesis and the spiritualistic hypothesis? I do not think so. I have no prejudices—what were the use of having

any, in these mysteries?—no reluctance to admit the survival and the intervention of the dead; but it is wise and necessary, before leaving the terrestrial plane, to exhaust all the suppositions, all the explanations there to be discovered. We have to make our choice between two manifestations of the unknown, two miracles, if you prefer, whereof one is situated in the world which we inhabit and the other in a region which, rightly or wrongly, we believe to be separated from us by nameless spaces which no human being, alive or dead, has crossed to this day. It is natural, therefore, that we should stay in our own world, as long as it gives us a foothold, as long as we are not pitilessly expelled from it by a series of irresistible and irrefutable facts issuing from the adjoining abyss. The survival of a spirit is no more improbable than the prodigious faculties which we are obliged to attribute to the mediums if we deny them

to the dead; but the existence of the medium, contrary to that of the spirit, is unquestionable; and therefore it is for the spirit, or for those who make use of its name, first to prove that it exists.

Do the extraordinary phenomena of which we have spoken—transmission of thought from one subconscious mind to another, perception of events at a distance, subliminal clairvoyance—occur when the dead are not in evidence, when the experiments are being made exclusively between living persons? This cannot be honestly contested. Certainly no one has ever obtained among living people series of communications or revelations similar to those of the great spiritualistic mediums, Mrs. Piper, Mrs. Thompson and Stainton Moses, nor anything that can be compared with these so far as continuity or lucidity is concerned. But, though the quality of the phenomena will

not bear comparison, it cannot be denied that their inner nature is identical. It is logical to infer from this that the real cause lies not in the source of inspiration, but in the personal value, the sensitiveness, the power of the medium. For the rest, Mr. J. G. Piddington, who devoted an exceedingly detailed study to Mrs. Thompson, plainly perceived in her, when she was not "entranced" and when there were no spirits whatever in question, manifestations inferior, it is true, but absolutely analogous to those involving the dead.[1] These mediums are pleased, in all good faith and probably unconsciously, to give to their subliminal faculties, to their secondary personalities, or to accept, on their behalf, names which were borne by beings who have

[1] For a discussion of these cases, which would take us too far from our subject, see Mr. J. G. Piddington's paper, *Phenomena, in Mrs. Thompson's Trance* (*Proceedings,* Vol. XVIII., pp. 180 *et seq.*); also Professor A. C. Pigou's article in Vol. XXIII. (pp. 286 *et seq.*), which treats of "Cross Correspondence" without the agency of spirits.

crossed to the farther side of the mystery: this is a matter of vocabulary or nomenclature which neither lessens nor increases the intrinsic significance of the facts. Well, in examining these facts, however strange and really unparalleled some of them may be, I never find one which proceeds frankly from this world or which comes indisputably from the other. They are, if you wish, phenomenal border incidents; but it cannot be said that the border has been violated. In the story of Sir Oliver Lodge's watch, for instance, which is one of the most characteristic and one which carries us farther than most, we must attribute to the medium faculties that have ceased to be human. She must have put herself in touch, whether by perception of events at a distance, or by transmission of thought from one subconscious mind to another, or again by subliminal clairvoyance, with the two surviving brothers of the deceased owner of the

watch; and, in the past subconsciousness of those two brothers, distant from each other, she had to rediscover a host of circumstances which they themselves had forgotten and which lay hidden beneath the heaped-up dust and darkness of six-and-sixty years. It is certain that a phenomenon of this kind passes the bounds of the imagination and that we should refuse to credit it if, first of all, the experiment had not been controlled and certified by a man of the standing of Sir Oliver Lodge and if, moreover, it did not form one of a group of equally significant facts which clearly show that we are not here concerned with an absolutely unique miracle or with an unhoped-for and unprecedented concourse of coincidences. It is simply a matter of distant perception, subliminal clairvoyance and telepathy raised to the highest power; and these three manifestations of the unexplored depths of man are to-day recognized and classified by

science, which is not saying that they are explained: that is another question. When, in connexion with electricity, we use such terms as positive, negative, induction, potential and resistance, we are also applying conventional words to facts and phenomena of whose inward essence we are utterly ignorant; and we must needs be content with these, pending better. There is, I insist, between these extraordinary manifestations and those given to us by a medium who is not speaking in the name of the dead, but a difference between the greater and the lesser, a difference of extent or degree and in no wise a difference in kind.

8

For the proof to be more decisive, it would be necessary that no one, neither the medium nor the witnesses, should ever have known of the existence of him whose past is

revealed by the dead man; in other words, that every living link should be eliminated. I do not believe that this has actually occurred up to the present, nor even that it is possible; in any case, it would be very difficult to control such an experiment. Be this as it may, Dr. Hodgson, who devoted part of his life to the quest of specific phenomena wherein the boundaries of mediumistic power should be plainly overstepped, believes that he found them in certain cases, of which—as the others were of very much the same nature—I will merely mention one of the most striking.[1] In a course of excellent sittings, with Mrs. Piper the medium, he communicated with various dead friends, who reminded him of a large number of common memories. The medium, the spirits and he himself seemed in a wonderfully accommodating mood; and the revelations were plentiful, exact and easy. In

[1] *Proceedings*, Vol. XIII., pp. 349-350 and 375.

this extremely favourable atmosphere, he was placed in communication with the soul of one of his best friends, who had died a year before and whom he simply calls "A." This A, whom he had known more intimately than most of the spirits with whom he had communicated previously, behaved quite differently and, while establishing his identity beyond dispute, vouchsafed only incoherent replies. Now A "had been troubled much, for years before his death, by headaches and occasionally mental exhaustion, though not amounting to positive mental disturbance."

The same phenomena appears to recur whenever similar troubles have come before death, as in cases of suicide.

"If the telepathic explanation is held to be the only one," says Dr. Hodgson (I give the gist of his observations), "if it is claimed that all the communications of these discarnate minds are only suggestions from

my subconscious self, it is unintelligible that, after having obtained satisfactory results from others whom I had known far less intimately than A, and with whom I had consequently far fewer recollections in common, I should get from him, in the same sittings, nothing but incoherencies. I am thus driven to believe that my subliminal self is not the only thing in evidence, that it is in the presence of a real, living personality, whose mental state is the same as it was at the hour of death, a personality which remains independent of my subliminal consciousness and absolutely unaffected by it, which is deaf to its suggestions and draws from its own resources the revelations which it makes."

The argument is not without value, but its full force would be obtained only if it were certain that none of those present knew of A's madness; otherwise it can be contended that, the notion of madness having

penetrated the subconscious intelligence of one of them, it worked upon it and gave to the replies induced a form in keeping with the state of mind presupposed in the dead man.

9

Of a truth, by extending the possibilities of the medium to these extremes, we furnish ourselves with explanations which forestall nearly everything, bar every road and all but deny to the spirits any power of manifesting themselves in the manner which they appear to have chosen. But why do they choose that manner? Why do they thus restrict themselves? Why do they jealously hug the narrow strip of territory which memory occupies on the confines of both worlds and from which none but indecisive or questionable evidence can reach us? Are there then no other outlets, no other horizons? Why do they tarry around us,

stagnant in their little pasts, when, in their freedom from the flesh, they ought to be able to wander at ease over the virgin stretches of space and time? Do they not yet know that the sign which will prove to us that they survive is to be found not with us, but with them, on the other side of the grave? Why do they come back with empty hands and empty words? Is that what one finds when one is steeped in infinity? Beyond our last hour is it all bare and shapeless and dim? If it be so, let them tell us; and the evidence of the darkness will at least possess a grandeur that is all too absent from these cross-examining methods. Of what use is it to die, if all life's trivialities continue? Is it really worth while to have passed through the terrifying gorges which open on the eternal fields, in order to remember that we had a great-uncle called Peter and that our Cousin Paul was afflicted with varicose veins and a gas-

tric complaint? At that rate, I should choose for those whom I love the august and frozen solitudes of the everlasting nothing. Though it be difficult for them, as they complain, to make themselves understood through a strange and sleep-bound organism, they tell us enough categorical details about the past to show that they could disclose similar details, if not about the future, which they perhaps do not yet know, at least about the lesser mysteries which surround us on every side and which our body alone prevents us from approaching. There are a thousand things, large or small, alike unknown to us, which we must perceive when feeble eyes no longer arrest our vision. It is in those regions from which a shadow separates us and not in foolish tittle-tattle of the past that they would at last find the clear and genuine proof which they seem to seek with such enthusiasm. Without demanding a great

miracle, one would nevertheless think that we had the right to expect from a mind which nothing now enthrals some other discourse than that which it avoided when it was still subject to matter.

# CHAPTER VII

## CROSS CORRESPONDENCE

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### I

THIS is where things stood when, of late years, the mediums, the spiritualists, or rather, it appears, the spirits themselves—for one cannot tell exactly with whom we have to do—perhaps dissatisfied at not being more definitely recognized and understood, invented, for a more effectual proof of their existence, what has been called "cross correspondence." Here the position is reversed: it is no longer a question of various and more or less numerous spirits revealing themselves through the agency of one and the same medium, but of a single spirit manifesting itself almost simultaneously through several mediums often at great distances from one another

and without any preliminary understanding among themselves. Each of these messages, taken alone, is usually unintelligible and yields a meaning only when laboriously combined with all the others.

As Sir Oliver Lodge says:

"The object of this ingenious and complicated effort clearly is to prove that there is some definite intelligence underlying the phenomena, distinct from that of any of the automatists, by sending fragments of a message or literary reference which shall be unintelligible to each separately—so that no effective mutual telepathy is possible between them—thus eliminating or trying to eliminate what had long been recognized by all members of the Society for Psychical Research as the most troublesome and indestructible of the semi-normal hypotheses. And the further object is evidently to prove as far as possible, by the substance and quality of the message, that it is character-

istic of the one particular personality who is ostensibly communicating, and of no other."[1]

The experiments are still in their early stages; and the most recent volumes of the *Proceedings* are devoted to them. Although the accumulated mass of evidence is already considerable, there is no conclusion to be drawn from it as yet; and, in any case, whatever the spiritualists may say, the suspicion of telepathy seems to me to be in no way removed. The experiments form a rather fantastic literary exercise, one much superior, intellectually, to the ordinary manifestations of the mediums; but, up to the present, there is no reason for placing their mystery in the other world rather than in this. Men have tried to see in them a proof that somewhere, in time or space, or else beyond both, there is a sort of immense cosmic reserve of knowledge upon which the

[1] *The Survival of Man.* Chap. XXV., p. 325.

spirits go and draw freely. But, if the reserve exists, which is very possible, nothing tells us that it is not the living rather than the dead who repair to it. It is very strange that the dead, if they really have access to the immeasurable treasure, should bring back nothing from it but a kind of ingenious child's puzzle, although it ought to contain myriads of lost or forgotten notions and acquirements, heaped up during thousands and thousands of years in abysses which our mind, weighed down by the body, can no longer penetrate, but which nothing seems to close against the investigations of freer and more subtle activities. They are evidently surrounded by innumerable mysteries, by unsuspected and formidable truths that loom large on every side. The smallest astronomical or biological revelation, the least secret of olden time, such as that of the temper of copper, possessed by the ancients, an archæological detail, a poem, a statue, a

recovered remedy, a shred of one of those unknown sciences which flourished in Egypt or Atlantis: any of these would form a much more decisive argument than hundreds of more or less literary reminiscences. Why do they speak to us so seldom of the future? And for what reason, when they do venture upon it, are they mistaken with such disheartening regularity? One would think, rather, that, in the sight of a being delivered from the trammels of the body and of time, the years, whether past or future, ought all to lie outspread on one and the same plane.[1] We may, therefore,

[1] In this connexion, however, we find two or three rather perturbing facts, a remarkable one being, at a spiritualistic meeting held by the late W. T. Stead, the prediction of the murder of King Alexander and Queen Draga, described with the most circumstantial details. A verbatim report of this prediction was drawn up and signed by some thirty witnesses; and Stead went next day to beg the Servian minister in London to warn the king of the danger that threatened him. The event took place, as announced, a few months later. But "precognition" does not necessarily require the intervention of the dead; moreover, every case of this kind, before being definitely accepted, would call for prolonged investigation in every particular.

say that the ingenuity of the proof turns against it. All things considered, as in the other attempts and notably those of the famous medium Stainton Moses, there is the same characteristic inability to bring us the veriest particle of truth or knowledge of which no vestige could be found in a living brain or in a book written on this earth. And yet it is inconceivable that there should not somewhere exist a knowledge that is not as ours and truths other than those which we possess here below. The case of Stainton Moses, whose name we have just mentioned, is a very striking one in this respect. This Stainton Moses was a dogmatic, hard-working clergyman, whose learning, Myers tells us, in the normal state, did not exceed that of an ordinary schoolmaster. But he was no sooner "entranced" before certain spirits of antiquity or of the middle ages, who are hardly known save to profound scholars, among others St.

Hippolytus, Bishop of Ostia, Plotinus, Athenodorus, the tutor of Augustus, and, more particularly, Grocyn, the friend of Erasmus, took possession of his person and manifested themselves through his agency. Now, Grocyn, for instance, furnished certain information about Erasmus which was at first thought to have been gathered in the other world, but which was subsequently discovered in forgotten but nevertheless accessible books. On the other hand, Stainton Moses' integrity was never questioned for an instant by those who knew him; and we may therefore take his word for it when he declares that he had not read the books in question. Here again, the mystery, inexplicable though it be, seems really to lie hidden in the midst of ourselves. It is unconscious reminiscence, if you will, suggestion at a distance, subliminal reading, but, no more than in cross correspondence, is it indispensable to have recourse to the

dead and to drag them by main force into the riddle, which, seen from our side of the grave, is dark and impassioned enough as it is. Furthermore, we must not insist unduly on this cross correspondence. We must remember that the whole matter is in its infancy and that the dead appear to have no small difficulty in grasping the requirements of the living.

2

In regard to this subject, as to the others, the spiritualists are fond of saying:

"If you refuse to admit the agency of spirits, the majority of these phenomena are absolutely inexplicable."

Agreed; nor do we pretend to explain them, for hardly anything is to be explained upon this earth. We are content simply to ascribe them to the incomprehensible power of the mediums, which is no more improbable than the survival of the dead and has

the advantage of not going outside the sphere which we occupy and of bearing relation to a large number of similar facts that occur among living people. Those singular faculties are baffling only because they are still sporadic and because but a very short time has elapsed since they received scientific recognition. Properly speaking, they are no more marvellous than those which we use daily without marvelling at them: our memory, for instance, our understanding, our imagination and so forth. They form part of the great miracle that we are; and, having once admitted the miracle, we should be surprised not so much at its extent as at its limits.

Nevertheless, to close this chapter, I am not at all of opinion that we must definitely reject the spiritualistic theory: that would be both unjust and premature. Hitherto, everything remains in suspense. We may say that things are still very little removed

from the point marked by Sir William Crookes, in 1874, in an article which he contributed to the *Quarterly Journal of Science:*

"The difference between the advocates of Psychic Force and the Spiritualists consists in this—that we contend that there is as yet insufficient proof of any other directing agent than the Intelligence of the Medium, and no proof whatever of the agency of Spirits of the Dead; while the Spiritualists hold it as a faith, not demanding further proof, that Spirits of the Dead are the sole agents in the production of all the phenomena. Thus the controversy resolves itself into a pure question of *fact,* only to be determined by a laborious and long-continued series of experiments and an extensive collection of psychological *facts,* which should be the first duty of the Psychological Society, the formation of which is now in progress."

Meanwhile, it is saying a good deal that rigorous scientific investigations have not utterly shattered a theory which so radically confounds the idea which we were wont to form of death. We shall see presently why, in considering our destinies beyond the grave, we need have no reason to linger too long over these apparitions or these revelations, even though they should really be incontestable and to the point. They would seem, all told, to be but the incoherent and precarious manifestations of a transitory state. They would at best prove, if we were bound to admit them, that a reflexion of ourselves, an after-vibration of the nerves, a bundle of emotions, a spiritual silhouette, a grotesque and forlorn image, or, more correctly, a sort of truncated and uprooted memory can, after our death, linger and float in a space where nothing remains to feed it, where it gradually becomes wan and lifeless, but where a special fluid, emanating

from an exceptional medium, succeeds, at moments, in galvanizing it. Perhaps it exists objectively, perhaps it subsists and revives only in the recollection of certain sympathies. It would, after all, be not unlikely that the memory which represents us during our life should continue to do so for a few weeks or even a few years after our decease. This would explain the evasive and deceptive character of those spirits which, possessing but a mnemonic existence, are naturally able to interest themselves only in matters within their reach. Hence their irritating and maniacal energy in clinging to the slightest facts, their sleepy dulness, their incomprehensible indifference and ignorance and all the wretched absurdities which we have noticed more than once.

But, I repeat, it is much simpler to attribute these absurdities to the special character and the as yet imperfectly recognized difficulties of telepathic communica-

tion. The unconscious suggestions of the most intelligent among those who take part in the experiment are impaired, disjointed and stripped of their main virtues in passing through the obscure intermediary of the medium. It may be that they stray, make their way into certain forgotten corners which the intelligence no longer visits and thence bring back more or less surprising discoveries; but the intellectual quality of the aggregate will always be inferior to that which a conscious mind would yield. Besides, once more, it is not yet time to draw conclusions. We must not lose sight of the fact that we have to do with a science which was born but yesterday and which is groping for its implements, its paths, its methods and its aim in a darkness denser than the earth's. The boldest bridge that men have yet undertaken to throw across the river of death is not to be built in thirty years. Most sciences have centuries of thankless efforts

and barren uncertainties behind them; and there are, I imagine, few among the younger of them that can show from the earliest hour, as this one does, promises of a harvest which may not be the harvest of their conscious sowing, but which already bids fair to yield much unknown and wondrous fruit.[1]

[1] To exhaust this question of survival and of communications with the dead, I ought to speak of Dr. Hyslop's recent investigations, made with the assistance of the mediums Smead and Chenoweth (communications with William James). I ought also to mention Julia's famous "bureau," and, above all, the extraordinary sittings of Mrs. Wriedt, the trumpet medium, who not only obtains communications in which the dead speak languages of which she herself is completely ignorant, but raises apparitions said to be extremely disturbing. I ought, lastly, to examine the facts set forth by Professor Porro, Dr. Venzano and M. Rozanne and many other things besides, for spiritualistic investigation and literature are already piling volume upon volume. But it was not my intention nor my pretension to make a complete study of scientific spiritualism. I wished merely to omit no essential point and to give a general but accurate idea of this posthumous atmosphere which no really new and decisive fact has come to unsettle since the manifestations of which we have spoken.

# CHAPTER VIII

## REINCARNATION

# CHAPTER VIII

## REINCARNATION

### I

SO much for survival proper. But certain spiritualists go farther and attempt the scientific proof of palingenesis and the transmigration of souls. I pass over their merely moral or scientific arguments, as well as those which they discover in the prenatal reminiscences of illustrious men and others. These reminiscences, though often disturbing, are still too rare, too sporadic, so to speak; and the supervision has not always been sufficiently close for us to be able to rely upon them with safety. Nor do I propose to pay attention to the proofs based upon the inborn aptitudes of genius or of certain infant prodigies, aptitudes which are difficult to explain, but which may

nevertheless be attributed to unknown laws of heredity. I shall be content to recall briefly the results of some of Colonel de Rochas' experiments, which leave one at a loss for an explanation.

First of all, it is only right to say that Colonel de Rochas is a savant who seeks nothing but objective truth and does so with a scientific strictness and integrity that have never been questioned. He puts certain exceptional subjects into an hypnotic sleep and, by means of downward passes, makes them trace back the whole course of their existence. He thus takes them successively to their youth, their adolescence and down to the extreme limits of their childhood. At each of these hypnotic stages, the subject reassumes the consciousness, the character and the state of mind which he possessed at the corresponding stage in his life. He goes over the same events, with their joys and sorrows. If he has been ill, he once

more passes through his illness, his convalescence and his recovery. If, for instance, the subject is a woman who has been a mother, she again becomes pregnant and again suffers the pains of child-birth. Carried back to an age when she was learning to write, she writes like a child and her writing can be placed side by side with the copy-books which she filled at school.

This in itself is very extraordinary; but, as Colonel de Rochas says:

"Up to the present we have walked on firm ground; we have been observing a physiological phenomenon which is difficult of explanation, but which numerous experiments and verifications allow us to look upon as certain."

We now enter a region where still more surprising enigmas await us. Let us, to come to details, take one of the simplest cases. The subject is a girl of eighteen, called Joséphine. She lives at Voiron, in

the department of the Isère. By means of downward passes she is brought back to the condition of a baby at its mother's breast. The passes continue and the wonder-tale runs its course. Joséphine can no longer speak; and we have the great silence of infancy, which seems to be followed by a silence more mysterious still. Joséphine no longer answers except by signs; *she is not yet born,* "she is floating in darkness." They persist; the sleep becomes heavier; and suddenly, from the depths of that sleep, rises the voice of another being, a voice unexpected and unknown, the voice of a churlish, distrustful and discontented old man. They question him. At first he refuses to answer, saying that "of course he's there, as he's speaking;" that "he sees nothing;" and that "he's in the dark." They increase the number of passes and gradually gain his confidence. His name is Jean Claude Bourdon; he is an old man; he

has long been ailing and bed-ridden. He tells the story of his life. He was born at Champvent, in the parish of Polliat, in 1812. He went to school until he was eighteen and served his time in the army with the Seventh Artillery at Besançon; and he describes his gay times there, while the sleeping girl makes the gesture of twirling an imaginary moustache. When he goes back to his native place, he does not marry, but he has a mistress. He leads a solitary life (I omit all but the essential facts) and dies at the age of seventy, after a long illness.

We now hear the dead man speak; and his posthumous revelations are not sensational, which, however, is not an adequate reason for doubting their genuineness. He "feels himself growing out of his body;" but he remains attached to it for a fairly long time. His fluidic body, which is at first diffused, takes a more concentrated form.

He lives in darkness, which he finds disagreeable; but he does not suffer. At last, the night in which he is plunged is streaked with a few flashes of light. The idea comes to him to reincarnate himself and he draws near to her who is to be his mother (that is to say, the mother of Joséphine). He encircles her until the child is born, whereupon he gradually enters the child's body. Until about the seventh year, this body was surrounded by a sort of floating mist, in which he used to see many things which he has not seen since.

The next thing to be done is to go back beyond Jean Claude. A mesmerization lasting nearly three-quarters of an hour, without lingering at any intermediate stage, brings the old man back to babyhood. A fresh silence, a new limbo; and then, suddenly, another voice and an unexpected individual. This time it is an old woman who has been very wicked; and so she is

in great torment (she is dead, at the actual instant; for, in this inverted world, lives go backwards and of course begin at the end). She is in deep darkness, surrounded by evil spirits. She speaks in a faint voice, but always gives definite replies to the questions put to her, instead of cavilling at every moment, as Jean Claude did. Her name is Philomène Carteron.

"By intensifying the sleep," adds Colonel de Rochas, whom I will now quote, "I induce the manifestations of a living Philomène. She no longer suffers, seems very calm and always answers very coldly and distinctly. She knows that she is unpopular in the neighbourhood, but no one is a penny the worse and she will be even with them yet. She was born in 1702; her maiden name was Philomène Charpigny; her grandfather on the mother's side was called Pierre Machon and lived at Ozan. In 1732 she married, at Chevroux, a man

named Carteron, by whom she had two children, both of whom she lost.

"Before her incarnation, Philomène had been a little girl, who died in infancy. Previous to that, she was a man who had committed murder; and it was to expiate this crime that she endured much suffering in the darkness, even after her life as a little girl, when she had had no time to do wrong. I did not think it necessary to carry the hypnosis further, because the subject appeared exhausted and her paroxysms were painful to watch.

"But, on the other hand, I noticed one thing which would tend to show that the revelations of these mediums rest on an objective reality. At Voiron, one of the regular attendants at my demonstrations is a young girl, Louise ——. She possesses a very sedate and thoughtful cast of mind, not at all open to hypnotic suggestion; and she has in a very high degree the capacity

(which is comparatively common in a lesser degree) of perceiving the magnetic effluvia of human beings and, consequently, the fluidic body. When Joséphine revives the memory of her past, a luminous aura is observed around her and is perceived by Louise. Now, to the eyes of Louise, this aura becomes dark when Joséphine is in the phase separating two existences. In every instance, there is a strong reaction in Joséphine when I touch points where Louise tells me that she perceives the aura, whether it be dark or light."

2

I thought it well to give the report of one of these experiments almost *in extenso,* because those who maintain the palingenesic theory find in these the only appreciable argument which they possess. Colonel de Rochas renewed them more than once with different subjects. Among these I will men-

tion only one, a girl called Marie Mayo, whose history is more complicated than Joséphine's and whose successive reincarnations take us back to the seventeenth century and carry us suddenly to Versailles, among the historical personages moving around Louis XIV.

Let us add that Colonel de Rochas is not the only mesmerizer who has obtained revelations of this kind, which may be henceforth classed among the incontestable facts of hypnotism. I have mentioned his alone because they offer the most substantial guarantees from every point of view.

What do they prove? We must begin, as in all questions of this kind, by entertaining a certain distrust of the medium. It goes without saying that all mediums, by the very nature of their faculties, are inclined to imposture, to trickery. I know that Colonel de Rochas, like Dr. Richet and like Professor Lombroso, was occasionally hoaxed.

That is the inherent defect of the machinery which we must perforce employ; and experiments of this sort will never possess the scientific value of those made in a physical or chemical laboratory. But this is not an *a priori* reason for denying them any sort of interest. As a question of fact, are imposture and trickery possible here? Obviously, even though the experiments be conducted under the strictest supervision. However complicated it may be, the subject can have learned his lesson and can cleverly avoid the traps laid for him. The best guarantee, when all is said, lies in his good faith and his moral sense, which the experimenters alone are in a position to test and to know; and for that we must trust to them. Besides, they neglect no precaution necessary to make imposture extremely difficult. After taking the subject, by means of transverse passes, up the stream of his life, they make him come down the same stream; and

the same events pass in the reverse order. Repeated tests and counter-tests always yield identical results; and the medium never hesitates or goes astray in the labyrinth of names, dates and incidents.[1]

Moreover, it would be requisite for these mediums, who are generally people of merely average intelligence, suddenly to become great poets in order thus to create, down to every detail, a series of characters, differing entirely one from the other, in which everything is in keeping—gestures, voice, temper, mind, thoughts, feeling—and ever ready to reply, in harmony with their inmost nature, to the most unexpected quest-

[1] In order to hide nothing and to bring all the documents into court, we may point out that Colonel de Rochas ascertained upon enquiry that the subjects' revelations concerning their former existences were inaccurate in several particulars:

"Their narratives were also full of anachronisms, which disclosed the presence of normal recollections among the suggestions that came from an unknown source. Nevertheless, one perfectly indubitable fact remains, which is that of the existence of certain visions recurring with the same characteristics in the case of a considerable number of persons unknown to one another."

ions. It has been said that every man is a Shakespeare in his dreams; but have we not here to do with dreams which, in their uniformity, bear a singular resemblance to fact?

I think, therefore, that we may be allowed, until we receive evidence to the contrary, to leave fraud out of the question. Another objection that might be raised, as was done with respect to the Myers phantoms, is the insignificance of their revelations from beyond the grave. I would rather look on this as an argument in behalf of their good faith. Those whose imagination is rich enough to create the wonderful persons whom we see living in their sleep would doubtless find no great difficulty in inventing a few fantastic but plausible details on the subject of the next world. Not one of them thinks of it. They are Christians and therefore carry deep down in themselves the traditional terror of hell,

the fear of purgatory and the vision of a paradise full of angels and palms. They never allude to any of it. Although they are most often ignorant of all the theories of reincarnation, they conform strictly to the theosophical or neospiritualistic hypothesis and are unconsciously faithful to it in their very indefiniteness: they speak vaguely of "the dark" in which they find themselves. They tell nothing, because they know nothing. It is impossible, apparently, for them to give any account of a state that is still illumined. In fact, it is very likely, if we admit the hypothesis of reincarnation and of evolution after death, that nature, here as elsewhere, does not proceed by bounds. There is no special reason why she should take a prodigious and inconceivable leap between life and death.

We do not find the dramatic change which, at first thought, we are rather inclined to expect. The spirit is first of all

confused at losing its body and every one of its familiar ways; it only recovers itself by degrees. It resumes consciousness slowly. This consciousness is subsequently purified, exalted and extended, gradually and indefinitely, until, reaching other spheres, the principle of life that animates it ceases to reincarnate itself and loses all contact with us. This would explain why we never have any but minor and elementary revelations.

All that concerns this first phase of the survival is fairly probable, even to those who do not admit the theory of reincarnation. For the rest, we shall see presently that the solutions which man's imagination finds there merely change the question and are inadequate and provisional.

3

We now come to the most serious objection, that of suggestion. Colonel de

Rochas declares that he and all the other experimenters who have given themselves up to this study "have not only avoided everything that could put the subject on a definite tack, but have often tried in vain to lead him astray by different suggestions." I am convinced of it: there can be no question of voluntary suggestion. But do we not know that, in these regions, unconscious and involuntary suggestion is often more powerful and effective than the other? In the hackneyed and rather childish experiment of table-turning, for instance, which, after all, is only a crude and elementary form of telepathy, the replies are nearly always dictated by the unconscious suggestion of a participant or a mere onlooker.[1] We should therefore first of all

[1] In this connexion may I be permitted to quote a personal experience? One evening, at the Abbaye de Saint-Wandrille, where I am wont to spend my summers, some newly-arrived guests were amusing themselves by making a small table spin on its foot. I was quietly smoking in a corner of the drawing-room, at some distance from the little table, taking no interest in

have to make sure that neither the hypnotizer nor the onlookers, nor yet the subject himself, have ever heard of the reincarnated persons. It will be enough, I shall be told, to employ for the counter-tests another operator and different onlookers, who are ignorant of the previous revelations. Yes,

what was happening around it and thinking of something quite different. After due entreaty, the table replied that it held the spirit of a seventeenth-century monk, who was buried in the east gallery of the cloisters, under a flagstone dated 1693. After the departure of the monk, who suddenly, for no apparent reason, refused to continue the interview, we thought that we would go, with a lamp, and look for the grave. We ended by discovering, in the far cloister, on the eastern side, a tombstone in very bad condition, broken, worn down, trodden into the ground and crumbling, on which, by examining it very closely, we were able, with great difficulty, to decipher the inscription "A.D. 1693." Now, at the moment of the monk's reply, there was no one in the drawing-room except my guests and myself. None of them knew the abbey; they had arrived that very evening, a few minutes before dinner, after which, as it was quite dark, they had put off their visit to the cloisters and the ruins until the following day. Therefore, short of a belief in the "shells" or the "elementals" of the theosophists, the revelation could only have come from me. Nevertheless, I believed myself to be absolutely ignorant of the existence of that particular tombstone, one of the least legible among a score of others, all belonging to the seventeenth century, which pave this part of the cloisters.

but the subject is not ignorant of them; and it is possible that the first suggestion has been so profound that it will remain for ever stamped upon the unconsciousness and that it will reproduce the same incarnations indefinitely, in the same order.

All this does not mean that the phenomena of suggestion are not themselves laden with mysteries; but that is another question. For the moment, as we see, the problem is almost insoluble and control impracticable. Meanwhile, since we have to choose between reincarnation and suggestion, it is right that we should confine ourselves, in the first instance, to the latter, in accordance with the principles which we have observed in the case of automatic speech and writing. Between two unknowns, common sense and prudence decree that we should turn first to the one on whose frontiers lie certain facts more frequently recorded, the one which shows a few familiar glimmers. Let us

exhaust the mystery of our life before forsaking it for the mystery of our death. Throughout this vast expanse of treacherous ground, it is important that, until fresh evidence arrives, we should keep to one inflexible rule, namely, that thought-transference exists as long as it is not absolutely and physically impossible for the subject or some person in the room to have cognizance of the incident in question, whether the cognizance be conscious or not, forgotten or actual. Even this gaurantee is not sufficient, for it is still possible, as we saw in the case of Sir Oliver Lodge's watch, for some one taking no part in the sitting and even very far away from it to be placed in communication with the medium by some unknown means and to influence the medium at a distance and unwittingly. Lastly, to provide for every contingency, before letting death come upon the boards, it would be necessary

to make certain that atavistic memory does not play an unforeseen part. Cannot a man, for instance, carry hidden in the depths of his being the recollection of events connected with the childhood of an ancestor whom he has never seen and communicate it to the medium by unconscious suggestion? It is not impossible. We carry in ourselves all the past, all the experience of our ancestors. If, by some magic, we could illumine the prodigious treasures of the subconscious memory, why should we not there discover the events and facts that form the sources of that experience? Before turning towards yonder unknown, we must utterly exhaust the possibilities of this terrestrial unknown. It is, moreover, remarkable but undeniable that, despite the strictness of a law which seems to shut out every other explanation, despite the almost unlimited and probably excessive scope allotted to the domain of suggestion, there nevertheless re-

main some facts which perhaps call for another interpretation.

But let us return to reincarnation and recognize, in passing, that it is very regrettable that the arguments of the theosophists and neospiritualists are not compelling, for there never was a more beautiful, a juster, a purer, a more moral, fruitful and consoling, nor, to a certain point, a more probable creed than theirs. It alone, with its doctrine of successive expiations and purifications, accounts for all the physical and intellectual inequalities, all the social iniquities, all the hideous injustices of fate. But the quality of a creed is no evidence of its truth. Even though it is the religion of six hundred millions of mankind, the nearest to the mysterious origins, the only one that is not odious and the least absurd of all, it will have to do what the others have not done, to bring unimpeachable testimony;

and what it has given us hitherto is but the first shadow of a proof begun.

4

And even that would not put an end to the riddle. In principle, reincarnation, sooner or later, is inevitable, since nothing can be lost nor remain stationary. What has not been demonstrated in any way and will perhaps remain indemonstrable is the reincarnation of the whole identical individual, notwithstanding the abolition of memory. But what matters to him that reincarnation, if he be unaware that he is still himself? All the problems of the conscious survival of man start up anew; and we have to begin all over again. Even if scientifically established, the doctrine of reincarnation, just like that of a survival, would not set a term to our questions. It replies to neither the first nor the last, those of the beginning and the end, the only ones

that are essential. It simply shifts them, pushes them a few hundreds, a few thousands of years back, in the hope, perhaps, of losing or forgetting them in silence and space. But they have come from the depths of the most prodigious infinities and are not content with a tardy solution. I am most certainly interested in learning what is in store for me, what will happen to me immediately after my death. You tell me:

"Man, in his successive incarnations, will make atonement by suffering, will be purified, in order that he may ascend from sphere to sphere until he returns to the divine essence whence he sprang."

I am willing to believe it, notwithstanding that all this still bears the somewhat questionable stamp of our little earth and its old religions; I am willing to believe it, but even then? What matters to me is not what will be for some time, but what will be for always; and your divine principle

appears to me not at all infinite nor definite. It even seems to me greatly inferior to that which I conceive without your help. Now, if it were based on thousands of facts, a religion that belittles the God conceived by my loftiest thought could never dominate my conscience. Your infinity or your God, while even more unintelligible than mine, is nevertheless smaller. If I be again immerged in Him, it means that I emerged from Him; if it be possible for me to have emerged from Him, then He is not infinite; and, if He be not infinite, what is He? We must accept one thing or the other: either He purifies me because I am outside Him and He is not infinite; or, being infinite, if He purify me, then there was something impure in Him, because it is a part of Himself which He is purifying in me. Moreover, how can we admit that this God who has existed for all time, who has the same infinity of millenaries behind Him as in

front of Him, should not yet have found time to purify Himself and put a period to His trials? What He was not able to do in the eternity previous to the moment of my existence He will not be able to do in the subsequent eternity, for the two are equal. And the same question presents itself where I am concerned. My principle of life, like His, exists from all eternity, for my emergence out of nothing would be more difficult of explanation than my existence without a beginning. I have necessarily had innumerable opportunities of incarnating myself; and I have probably done so, seeing that it is hardly likely that the idea only came to me yesterday. All the chances of reaching my goal have therefore been offered to me in the past; and all those which I shall find in the future will add nothing to the number, which was already infinite. There is not much to say in answer to these interrogations which spring up

everywhence the moment our thought glances upon them. Meanwhile, I had rather know that I know nothing than feed myself on illusory and irreconcilable assertions. I had rather keep to an infinity whose incomprehensibility has no bounds than restrict myself to a God whose incomprehensibility is limited on every side. Nothing compels you to speak of your God; but, if you take upon yourself to do so, it is necessary that your explanations should be superior to the silence which they break.

5

It is true that the scientific spiritualists do not venture as far as this God; but then, tight-pressed between the two riddles of the beginning and the end, they have almost nothing to tell us. They follow the tracks of our dead for a few seconds, in a world where seconds no longer count; and then they abandon them in the darkness. I do

not reproach them, because we have here to do with things which, in all probability, we shall not know in the day when we shall think that we know everything. I do not ask that they shall reveal to me the secret of the universe, for I do not believe, like a child, that this secret can be expressed in three words or that it can enter my brain without bursting it. I am even persuaded that beings who might be millions of times more intelligent than the most intelligent among us would not yet possess it, for this secret must be as infinite, as unfathomable, as inexhaustible as the universe itself. The fact none the less remains that this inability to go even a few years beyond the life after death detracts greatly from the interest of their experiments and revelations; at best, it is but a short space gained; and it is not by this juggling on the threshold that our fate is decided. I am ready to pass over what may befall me in the short interval

filled by those revelations, as I am even now passing over what befalls me in my life. My destiny does not lie there, nor my home. I do not doubt that the facts reported are genuine and proved; but what is even much more certain is that the dead, if they survive, have not a great deal to teach us, whether because, at the moment when they can speak to us, they have nothing yet to tell us, or because, at the moment when they might have something to reveal to us, they are no longer able to do so, but withdraw for ever and lose sight of us in the immensity which they are exploring.

# CHAPTER IX

## THE FATE OF OUR CONSCIOUSNESS

# CHAPTER IX

## THE FATE OF OUR CONSCIOUSNESS

### I

LET us dispense with their uncertain aid and endeavour to make our way to the other side alone. To return, then, to the theories which we were examining before these necessary digressions, it would seem that survival with our present consciousness is nearly as impossible and as incomprehensible as total annihilation. Moreover, even if it were admissible, it could not be dreadful. It is certain that, when the body disappears, all physical sufferings will disappear at the same time; for we cannot imagine a spirit suffering in a body which it no longer possesses. With them will vanish simultaneously all that we call mental or moral sufferings, seeing that all of them, if

we examine them well, spring from the ties and habits of our senses. Our spirit feels the reaction of the sufferings of our body, or of the bodies that surround it; it cannot suffer in itself or through itself. Slighted affection, shattered love, disappointments, failures, despair, betrayal, personal humiliations, as well as the sorrows and the loss of those whom it loves, acquire their potent sting only by passing through the body which it animates. Outside its own pain, which is the pain of not knowing, the spirit, once delivered from its flesh, could suffer only in the recollection of the flesh. It is possible that it still grieves over the troubles of those whom it has left behind on earth. But to its eyes, since it no longer reckons the days, these troubles will seem so brief that it will not grasp their duration; and, knowing what they are and knowing whither they lead, it will not behold their severity.

The spirit is insensible to all that is not happiness. It is made only for infinite joy, which is the joy of knowing and understanding. It can grieve only at perceiving its own limits; but to perceive those limits, when there are no more bounds to space and time, is already to transcend them.

2

It is now a question of knowing whether that spirit, sheltered from all sorrow, will remain itself, will perceive and recognize itself in the bosom of infinity; and up to what point it is important that it should recognize itself. This brings us to the problems of survival without consciousness, or survival with a consciousness different from that of to-day.

Survival without consciousness seems at first sight the more probable. From the point of view of the good or ill awaiting us on the other side of the grave it amounts

to annihilation. It is lawful, therefore, for those who prefer the easiest solution and that most consistent with the present state of human thought to limit their anxiety to that. They have nothing to dread; for, on close inspection, every fear, if any remained, should deck itself with hopes. The body disintegrates and can no longer suffer; the mind, separated from the source of pleasure and pain, is extinguished, scattered and lost in a boundless darkness; and what comes is the great peace so often prayed for, the sleep without measure, without dreams and without awakening.

But this is only a solution that fosters indolence. If we press those who speak of survival without consciousness, we perceive that they mean only their present consciousness, for man conceives no other; and we have just seen that it is almost impossible for that manner of consciousness to persist in infinity.

Unless, indeed, they would deny every sort of consciousness, even that cosmic consciousness into which their own will fall. But this were to solve very quickly and very blindly, with a stroke of the sword in the night, the greatest and most mysterious question that can arise in a man's brain.

3

It is evident that, in the depths of our thought limited on every side, we shall never be able to form the least idea of an infinite consciousness. There is even an essential antinomy between the words consciousness and infinity. To speak of consciousness is to mean the most definite thing conceivable in the finite; consciousness, properly speaking, is the finite huddled into itself in order to discover and feel its closest limits, to the end that it may enjoy them as closely as possible. On the other hand, it is impossible for us to separate the

idea of intelligence from the idea of consciousness. Any intelligence that does not seem capable of transforming itself into consciousness becomes for us a mysterious phenomenon to which we give names more mysterious still, lest we should have to admit that we understand nothing of it at all. Now, on this little earth of ours, which is but a dot in space, we see expended in every scale of life (remember, for instance, the wonderful combinations and organisms of the insect world), a mass of intelligence so vast that our human intelligence cannot even dream of assessing it. Everything that exists—and man first of all—is incessantly drawing upon that inexhaustible reserve. We are therefore irresistibly driven to ask ourselves if that cosmic intelligence is not the emanation of an infinite consciousness, or if it must not, sooner or later, elaborate one. And this sets us tossing between two irreducible

impossibilities. What is most probable is that here again we are judging everything from the lowlands of our anthropomorphism. At the summit of our infinitesimal life, we see only intelligence and consciousness, the extreme point of thought; and from this we infer that, at the summits of all lives, there could be naught but intelligence and consciousness, whereas these perhaps occupy only an inferior place in the hierarchy of spiritual or other possibilities.

4

Survival absolutely denuded of consciousness would, therefore, be possible only if we denied a cosmic consciousness. As soon as we admit this consciousness, under whatsoever form, we are bound to share in it; and, up to a certain point, the question is indistinguishable from that of the continuance of a more or less modified consciousness. There is, for the moment, no hope

of solving it; but we are free to grope in its darkness, which is not perhaps equally dense at all points.

Here begins the open sea. Here begins the glorious adventure, the only one abreast with human curiosity, the only one that soars as high as its highest longing. Let us accustom ourselves to regard death as a form of life which we do not yet understand; let us learn to look upon it with the same eye that looks upon birth; and soon our mind will be accompanied to the steps of the tomb with the same glad expectation that greets a birth.

Suppose that a child in its mother's womb were endowed with a certain consciousness; that unborn twins, for instance, could, in some obscure fashion, exchange their impressions and communicate their hopes and fears to each other. Having known naught but the warm maternal shades, they would not feel straitened nor unhappy there. They

would probably have no other idea than to prolong as long as possible that life of abundance free from cares and of sleep free from alarms. But if, even as we are aware that we must die, they too knew that they must be born, that is to say, suddenly leave the shelter of that gentle darkness and abandon for ever that captive but peaceful existence, to be precipitated into an absolutely different, unimaginable and boundless world, how great would be their anxieties and their fears! And yet there is no reason why our own anxieties and fears should be more justified and less ridiculous. The character, the spirit, the intentions, the benevolence or the indifference of the unknown to which we are subject do not alter between our birth and our death. We remain always in the same infinity, in the same universe. It is perfectly reasonable and legitimate to persuade ourselves that the tomb is no more dreadful than the cradle.

It would even be legitimate and reasonable to accept the cradle only on account of the tomb. If, before being born, we were permitted to choose between the great peace of non-existence and a life that should not be completed by the glorious hour of death, which of us, knowing what he ought to know, would accept the disquieting problem of an existence that would not lead to the reassuring mystery of its end? Which of us would wish to come into a world where we can learn so little, if he did not know that he must enter it if he would leave it and learn more? The best thing about life is that it prepares this hour for us, that it is the one and only road leading to the magic gateway and into that incomparable mystery where misfortunes and sufferings will no longer be possible, because we shall have lost the body that produced them; where the worst that can befall us is the dreamless sleep which we number among the greatest

boons on earth; where, lastly, it is almost unimaginable that a thought should not survive to mingle with the substance of the universe, that is to say, with infinity, which, if it be not a waste of indifference, can be nothing but a sea of joy.

5

Before fathoming that sea, let us remark to those who aspire to maintain their ego that they are calling for the sufferings which they dread. The ego implies limits. The ego cannot subsist except in so far as it is separated from that which surrounds it. The stronger the ego, the narrower its limits and the clearer the separation. The more painful too; for the mind, if it remain as we know it—and we are not able to imagine it different—will no sooner have seen its limits than it will wish to overstep them; and, the more separated it feels, the greater will be its longing to unite with

that which lies outside. There will therefore be an eternal struggle between its being and its aspirations. And really it would have served no object to be born and die only to arrive at these interminable contests. Have we not here yet one more proof that our ego, as we conceive it, could never subsist in the infinity where it must needs go, since it cannot go elsewhere? It behooves us therefore to clear away conceptions that emanate only from our body, even as the mists that veil the daylight from our sight emanate only from the lowlands. Pascal has said, once and for all:

"The narrow limits of our being conceal infinity from our view."

*6*

On the other hand—for we must keep nothing back, nor turn from the adverse darkness should it seem nearest to the truth, nor show any bias—on the other hand, we

can grant to those who yearn to remain as they are that the survival of an atom of themselves would suffice for a new entrance into an infinity from which their body no longer separates them.

If it seems impossible that anything—a movement, a vibration, a radiation—should stop or disappear, why, then, should thought be lost? There will, no doubt, subsist more than one idea powerful enough to allure the new ego, which will nourish itself and thrive on all that it will find in that boundless environment, just as the other ego, on this earth, nourished itself and throve on all that it met there. Since we have been able to acquire our present consciousness, why should it be impossible for us to acquire another? For that ego which is so dear to us and which we believe ourselves to possess was not made in a day; it is not at present what it was at the hour of our birth. Much more chance than pur-

pose has entered into it; and much more foreign substance than any inborn substance which it contained. It is but a long series of acquisitions and transformations, of which we do not become aware until the awakening of our memory; and its kernel, of which we do not know the nature, is perhaps more immaterial and less concrete than a thought. If the new environment which we enter on leaving our mother's womb transforms us to such a point that there is, so to speak, no connexion between the embryo that we were and the man that we have become, is it not right to think that the far newer, stranger, wider and richer environment which we enter on quitting life will transform us even more? We can see in what happens to us here a figure of what awaits us elsewhere and can readily admit that our spiritual being, liberated from its body, if it does not mingle at the first onset with the infinite, will develop itself there

gradually, will choose itself a substance and, no longer trammelled by space and time, will go on for ever growing. It is very possible that our loftiest wishes of to-day will become the law of our future development. It is very possible that our best thoughts will welcome us on the farther shore and that the quality of our intellect will determine that of the infinite which crystallizes around it. Every hypothesis is permissible and every question, provided it be addressed to happiness; for unhappiness is no longer able to answer it. It finds no place in the human imagination that methodically explores the future. And, whatever be the force that survives us and presides over our existence in the other world, this existence, to presume the worst, could be no less great, no less happy than that of to-day. It will have no other career than infinity; and infinity is nothing if it be not felicity. In any case, it seems fairly

certain that we spend in this world the only narrow, grudging, obscure and sorrowful moment of our destiny.

## 7

We have said that the peculiar sorrow of the mind is the sorrow of not knowing or not understanding, which includes the sorrow of being powerless; for he who knows the supreme causes, being no longer paralyzed by matter, becomes one with them and acts with them; and he who understands ends by approving, or else the universe would be a mistake, which is not possible, an infinite mistake being inconceivable. I do not believe that another sorrow of the sheer mind can be imagined. The only sorrow which, at first thought, might seem admissible—and which, in any case, could be but ephemeral—would arise from the sight of the pain and misery

remaining on the earth which we have left. But this sorrow, after all, would be but one aspect and an insignificant phase of the sorrow of being powerless and of not understanding. As for the latter, though it is not only beyond the domain of our intelligence, but even at an insuperable distance from our imagination, we may say that it would be intolerable only if it were without hope. But, for that, the universe would have to abandon any attempt to understand itself, or else admit within itself an object that remained for ever foreign to it. Either the mind will not perceive its limits and, consequently, will not suffer from them, or else it will overstep them as it perceives them; for how could the universe have parts eternally condemned to form no part of itself and of its knowledge? Hence we cannot understand that the torture of not understanding, supposing it to exist for a moment, should not end by absorption in

the state of infinity, which, if it be not happiness as we comprehend it, could be naught but an indifference higher and purer than joy.

# CHAPTER X

## THE TWO ASPECTS OF INFINITY

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### I

LET us turn our thoughts towards it. The problem goes beyond humanity and embraces all things. It is possible, I think, to view infinity under two distinct aspects. Let us contemplate the first of them. We are plunged in a universe that has no limits in space or time. It can neither go forward nor go back. It has no origin. It never began, nor will it ever end. The myriads of years behind it are even as the myriads which it has yet to unroll. From all time it has been at the boundless centre of the days. It could have no aim, for, if it had one, it would have attained it in the infinity of the years that lie behind us; besides, that aim would be outside itself

and, if there were anything outside it, it would be bounded by that thing and would cease to be infinity. It is not making for anywhere, for it would have arrived there; consequently, all that the worlds within its pale, all that we ourselves do can have no influence upon it. All that it will do it has done. All that it has not done remains undone because it can never do it. If it have no mind, it will never have one. If it have one, that mind has been at its climax from all time and will remain there, changeless and immovable. It is as young as it has ever been and as old as it will ever be. It has made in the past all the efforts and all the trials which it will make in the future; and, as all the possible combinations have been exhausted since what we cannot even call the beginning, it does not seem as if that which has not taken place in the eternity that stretches before our birth can happen in the eternity that will

follow our death. If it have not become conscious, it will never become conscious; if it know not what it wishes, it will continue in ignorance, hopelessly, knowing all or knowing nothing and remaining as near its end as its beginning.

This is the gloomiest thought to which man can attain. So far, I do not think that its depths have been sufficiently sounded. If it were really irrefutable—and some may contend that it is—if it actually contained the last word of the great riddle, it would be almost impossible to live in its shadow. Naught save the certainty that our conceptions of time and space are illusive and absurd can lighten the abyss wherein our last hope would perish.

2

This universe thus conceived would be, if not intelligible, at least admissible by our reason; but in that universe float billions of

worlds limited by space and time. They are born, they die and they are born again. They form part of the whole; and we see, therefore, that parts of that which has neither beginning nor end themselves begin and end. We, in fact, know only those parts; and they are of a number so infinite that in our eyes they fill all infinity. That which is going nowhere teems with that which appears to be going somewhere. That which has always known what it wants, or will never learn, seems to be eternally experimenting with more or less ill-success. At what goal is it aiming, since it is already there? Everything that we discover in that which could not possibly have an object looks as though it were pursuing one with inconceivable ardour; and the mind that animates what we see in that which should know everything and possess itself seems to know nothing and to seek itself without intermission. Thus all

that is apparent to our senses in infinity gainsays that which our reason is compelled to ascribe to it. According as we fathom it, we come to understand how deep is our want of understanding; and, the more we strive to penetrate the two incomprehensible problems that stand face to face, the more they contradict each other.

3

What will become of us amid all this confusion? Shall we leave the finite wherein we dwell to be swallowed up in this or the other infinite? In other words, shall we end by absorption in the infinite which our reason conceives, or shall we remain eternally in that which our eyes behold, that is to say, in numberless changing and ephemeral worlds? Shall we never leave those worlds which seem doomed to die and to be reborn eternally, to enter at last into that which, from all eternity, can neither

have been born nor have died and which exists without either future or past? Shall we one day escape, with all that surrounds us, from this unhappy speculation, to find our way at last into peace, wisdom, changeless and boundless consciousness, or into hopeless unconsciousness? Shall we have the fate which our senses foretell, or that which our intelligence demands? Or are both senses and intelligence only illusions, puny implements, vain weapons of an hour, which were never intended to examine or defy the universe? If there really be a contradiction, is it wise to accept it and to deem impossible that which we do not understand, seeing that we understand almost nothing? Is truth not at an immeasurable distance from these inconsistencies which appear to us enormous and irreducible and which, doubtless, are of no more importance than the rain that falls upon the sea?

4

But, even to our poor understanding of to-day, the discrepancy between the infinity conceived by our reason and that perceived by our senses is perhaps more apparent than real. When we say that, in a universe that has existed since all eternity, every experiment, every possible combination has been made; when we declare that there is no chance that what has not taken place in the uncountable past can take place in the uncountable future, our imagination perhaps attributes to the infinity of time a preponderance which it cannot possess. In truth, all that infinity contains must be as infinite as the time at its disposal; and the chances, encounters and combinations that lie therein have not been exhausted in the eternity that has gone before us any more than they could be in the eternity that will come after us. The infinity of time is no vaster than the infinity of the substance of the universe.

Events, forces, chances, causes, effects, phenomena, fusions, combinations, coincidences, harmonies, unions, possibilities, lives are represented in it by innumerous numbers that entirely fill a bottomless and vergeless abyss where they have been shaken together from what we call the beginning of the world that had no beginning and where they will be stirred up until the end of a world that will have no end. There is, therefore, no climax, no changelessness, no immovability. It is probable that the universe is seeking and finding itself every day, that it has not become entirely conscious and does not yet know what it wants. It is possible that its ideal is still veiled by the shadow of its immensity; it is also possible that experiments and chances are following one upon the other in unimaginable worlds, compared wherewith all those which we see on starry nights are no more than a pinch of gold-dust in the ocean

depths. Lastly, if either be true, it is also true that we ourselves, or what remains of us—it matters not—will profit one day by those experiments and those chances. That which has not yet happened may suddenly supervene; and the next state, with the supreme wisdom which will recognize and be able to establish that state, is perhaps ready to arise from the clash of circumstances. It would not be at all astonishing if the consciousness of the universe, in the endeavour to form itself, had not yet encountered the combination of necessary chances and if human thought were actually supporting one of those decisive chances. Here there is a hope. Small as man and his brain may appear, they have exactly the value of the most enormous forces that they are able to conceive, since there is neither great nor small in the immeasurable; and, if our body equalled the dimensions of all the worlds which our eyes can

see, it would have exactly the same weight and the same importance as compared with the universe that it has to-day. The mind alone perhaps occupies in infinity a space which comparisons do not reduce to nothing.

5

For the rest, if everything must be said, at the cost of constantly and shamelessly contradicting one's self in the dark, and to return to the first supposition, the idea of possible progress, it is extremely probable that this again is one of those childish disorders of our brain which prevents us from seeing the thing that is. It is quite as probable, as we have seen above, that there never was, that there never will be any progress, because there could not be a goal. At most there may occur a few ephemeral combinations which, to our poor eyes, will seem happier or more beautiful than others.

Even so, we think gold more beautiful than the mud in the street, or the flower in a splendid garden happier than the stone at the bottom of a drain; but all this, obviously, is of no importance, has no corresponding reality and proves nothing in particular.

The more we reflect upon it, the more pronounced is the infirmity of our intelligence which cannot succeed in reconciling the idea of progress and even the idea of experiment with the supreme idea of infinity. Although nature has been incessantly and indefatigably repeating herself before our eyes for thousands of years, reproducing the same trees and the same animals, we cannot contrive to understand why the universe indefinitely recommences experiments that have been made billions of times. It is inevitable that, in the innumerable combinations that have been and are being made in termless time and bound-

less space, there have been and still are millions of planets and consequently millions of human races exactly similar to our own, side by side with myriads of others more or less different from it. Let us not say to ourselves that it would require an unimaginable concourse of circumstances to reproduce a globe like to our earth in every respect. We must remember that we are in the infinite and that this unimaginable concourse must necessarily take place in the innumerousness which we are unable to imagine. Though it need billions and billions of cases for two features to coincide, those billions and billions will encumber infinity no more than would a single case. Place an infinite number of worlds in an infinite number of infinitely diverse circumstances: there will always be an infinite number for which those circumstances will be alike; if not, we should be setting bounds to our idea of the universe, which

would forthwith become more incomprehensible still. From the moment that we insist sufficiently upon that thought, we necessarily arrive at these conclusions. If they have not struck us hitherto, it is because we never go to the farthest point of our imagination. Now the farthest point of our imagination is but the beginning of reality and gives us only a small, purely human universe, which, vast as it may seem, dances in the real universe like an apple on the sea. I repeat, if we do not admit that thousands of worlds, similar in all points to our own, in spite of the billions of adverse chances, have always existed and still exist to-day, we are sapping the foundations of the only possible conception of the universe or of infinity.

6

Now how is it that those millions of exactly similar human races, which from all

time suffer what we have suffered and are still suffering, profit us nothing, that all their experiences and all their schools have had no influence upon our first efforts and that everything has to be done again and begun again incessantly?

As we see, the two theories balance each other. It is well to acquire by degrees the habit of understanding nothing. There remains to us the faculty of choosing the less gloomy of the two or persuading ourselves that the mists of the other exist only in our brain. As that strange visionary, William Blake, said:

> "Nor is it possible to thought
> A greater than itself to know."

Let us add that it is not possible for it to know anything other than itself. What we do not know would be enough to create the world afresh; and what we do know cannot add one moment to the life of a fly. Who can tell but that our chief mistake lies in

believing that an intelligence, were it an intelligence thousands of times as great as ours, directs the universe? It may be a force of quite another nature, a force that differs as widely from that on which our brain prides itself as electricity, for instance, differs from the wind that blows. That is why it is fairly probable that our mind, however powerful it become, will always grope in mystery. If it be certain that everything in us must also be in nature, because everything comes to us from her; if the mind and all the logic which it has placed at the culminating point of our being direct or seem to direct all the actions of our life, it by no means follows that there is not in the universe a force greatly superior to thought, a force having no imaginable relation to the mind, a force which animates and governs all things according to other laws and of which nothing is found in us but almost imperceptible

traces, even as almost imperceptible traces of thought are all that can be found in plants and minerals.

In any case, there is nothing here to make us lose courage. It is necessarily the human illusion of evil, ugliness, uselessness and impossibility that is to blame. We must wait not for the universe to be transformed, but for our intelligence to expand or to take part in the other force; and we must maintain our confidence in a world which knows nothing of our conceptions of purpose and progress, because it doubtless has ideas whereof we have no idea, a world, moreover, which could scarcely wish itself harm.

7

"These are but vain speculations," it will be said. "What matters, after all, the idea which we form of those things which belong to the unknowable, seeing that the unknowable, were we a thousand times as

intelligent as we are, is closed to us for ever and that the idea which we form of it will never have any value?"

That is true; but there are degrees in our ignorance of the unknowable; and each of those degrees marks a triumph of the intelligence. To estimate more and more completely the extent of what it does not know is all that man's knowledge can hope for. Our idea of the unknowable was and always will be valueless, I admit; but it nevertheless is and will remain the most important idea of mankind. All our morality, all that is in the highest degree noble and profound in our existence has always been based on this idea devoid of real value. To-day, as yesterday, even though it be possible to recognize more clearly that it is too incomplete and relative ever to have any actual value, it is necessary to carry it as high and as far as we can. It alone creates the only atmosphere wherein

the best part of ourselves can live. Yes, it is the unknowable into which we shall not enter; but that is no reason for saying to ourselves:

"I am closing all the doors and all the windows; henceforth I shall interest myself only in things which my every-day intelligence can compass. Those things alone have the right to influence my actions and my thoughts."

Where should we arrive at that rate? What things can my intelligence compass? Is there a thing in this world that can be separated from the inconceivable? Since there is no means of eliminating that inconceivable, it is reasonable and salutary to make the best of it and therefore to imagine it as stupendously vast as we are able. The gravest reproach that can be brought against the positive religions and notably against Christianity is that they have too often, if not in theory, at least in practice,

encouraged such a narrowing of the mystery of the universe. By broadening it, we broaden the space wherein our mind will move. It is for us what we make it: let us then form it of all that we can reach on the horizon of ourselves. As for the mystery itself, we shall, of course, never reach it; but we have a much greater chance of approaching it by facing it and going whither it draws us than by turning our backs upon it and returning to that place where we well know that it no longer is. Not by diminishing our thoughts shall we diminish the distance that separates us from the ultimate truths; but by enlarging them as much as possible we are sure of deceiving ourselves as little as possible. And the loftier our idea of the infinite the more buoyant and the purer becomes the spiritual atmosphere wherein we live and the wider and deeper the horizon against which our thoughts and

feelings stand out, the horizon which is all their life and which they inspire.

"Perpetually to construct ideas requiring the utmost stretch of our faculties," wrote Herbert Spencer, "and perpetually to find that such ideas must be abandoned as futile imaginations, may realize to us more fully than any other course the greatness of that which we vainly strive to grasp. . . . By continually seeking to know and being continually thrown back with a deepened conviction of the impossibility of knowing, we may keep alive the consciousness that it is alike our highest wisdom and our highest duty to regard that through which all things exist as the Unknowable."

8

Whatever the ultimate truth may be, whether we admit the abstract, absolute and perfect infinity—the changeless, immovable infinity which has attained perfection and

which knows everything, to which our reason tends—or whether we prefer that offered to us by the evidence, undeniable here below, of our senses—the infinity which seeks itself, which is still evolving and not yet established—it behoves us above all to foresee in it our fate, which, for that matter, must, in either case, end by absorption in that very infinity.

# CHAPTER XI

## OUR FATE IN THOSE INFINITIES

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### OUR FATE IN THOSE INFINITIES

THE first infinity, the ideal infinity, corresponds most nearly with the requirements of our reason, which is not a reason for giving it the preference. It is impossible for us to foresee what we shall become in it, because it seems to exclude any becoming. It therefore but remains for us to address ourselves to the second, to that which we see and imagine in time and space. Furthermore, it is possible that it may precede the other. However absolute our conception of the universe, we have seen that we can always admit that what has not taken place in the eternity before us will happen in the eternity after us and that there is nothing save an untold number of chances to prevent the universe from

acquiring in the end that perfect consciousness which will establish it at its zenith.

2

Behold us, then, in the infinity of those worlds, the stellar infinity, the infinity of the heavens, which assuredly veils other things from our eyes, but which cannot be a total illusion. It seems to us to be peopled only with objects—planets, suns, stars, nebulæ, atoms, imponderous fluids—which move, unite and separate, repel and attract one another, which shrink and expand, are for ever shifting and never arrive, which measure space in that which has no confines and number the hours in that which has no term. In a word, we are in an infinity that seems to have almost the same character and the same habits as that power in the midst of which we breathe and which, upon our earth, we call nature or life.

What will be our fate in that infinity? We are asking ourselves no idle question, even if we should unite with it after losing all consciousness, all notion of the ego, even if we should exist there as no more than a little nameless substance—soul or matter, we cannot tell—suspended in the equally nameless abyss that replaces time and space. It is not an idle question, for it concerns the history of the worlds or of the universe; and this history, far more than that of our petty existence, is our own great history, in which perhaps something of ourselves or something incomparably better and vaster will end by meeting us again some day.

3

Shall we be unhappy there? It is hardly reassuring when we consider the ways of nature and remember that we form part of a universe that has not yet gathered its

wisdom. We have seen, it is true, that good and bad fortune exist only in so far as regards our body and that, when we have lost the organ of suffering, we shall not meet any of the earthly sorrows again. But our anxiety does not end here; and will not our mind, lingering upon our erstwhile sorrows, drifting derelict from world to world, unknown to itself in an unknowable that seeks itself hopelessly, will not our mind know here the frightful torture of which we have already spoken and which is doubtless the last that imagination can touch with its wing? Finally, if there were nothing left of our body and our mind, there would still remain the matter and the spirit (or, at least, the obviously single force to which we give that double name) which composed them and whose fate must be no more indifferent to us than our own fate; for, let us repeat, from our death onwards, the adventure of the universe be-

comes our own adventure. Let us not, therefore, say to ourselves:

"What can it matter? We shall not be there."

We shall be there always, because everything will be there.

4

And will this everything wherein we shall be included, in a world ever seeking itself, continue a prey to new and perpetual and perhaps painful experiences? Since the part that we were was unhappy, why should the part that we shall be enjoy a better fortune? Who can assure us that yonder unending combinations and endeavours will not be more sorrowful, more stupid and more baneful than those which we are leaving; and how shall we explain that these have come about after so many millions of others which ought to have opened the eyes of the genius of infinity? It is idle

to persuade ourselves, as Hindu wisdom would, that our sorrows are but illusions and appearances: it is none the less true that they make us very really unhappy. Has the universe elsewhere a more complete consciousness, a more just and serene understanding than on this earth and in the worlds which we discern? And, if it be true that it has somewhere attained that better understanding, why does the mind that presides over the destinies of our earth not profit by it? Is no communication possible between worlds which must have been born of the same idea and which lie in its depths? What would be the mystery of that isolation? Are we to believe that the earth marks the farthest stage and the most successful experiment? What, then, can the mind of the universe have done and against what darkness must it have struggled, to have come only to this? But, on the other hand, that darkness and those

barriers which can have come only from itself, since they could have arisen no elsewhere, have they the power to stay its progress? Who then could have set those insoluble problems to infinity and from what more remote and profound region than itself could they have issued? Some one, after all, must know the answer to them; and, as behind infinity there can be none that is not infinity itself, it is impossible to imagine a malignant will in a will that leaves no point around it which is not wholly covered. Or are the experiments begun in the stars continued mechanically, by virtue of the force acquired, without regard to their uselessness and their pitiful consequences, according to the custom of nature, who knows nothing of our parsimony and squanders the suns in space as she does the seed on earth, knowing that nothing can be lost? Or, again, is the whole question of our peace and happiness,

like that of the fate of the worlds, reduced to knowing whether or not the infinity of endeavours and combinations be equal to that of eternity? Or, lastly, to come to what is most likely, is it we who deceive ourselves, who know nothing, who see nothing and who consider imperfect that which is perhaps faultless; we, who are but an infinitesimal fragment of the intelligence which we judge by the aid of the little shreds of understanding which it has vouchsafed to lend us?

5

How could we reply, how could our thoughts and glances penetrate the infinite and the invisible, we who do not understand nor even see the thing by which we see and which is the source of all our thoughts? In fact, as has been very justly observed, man does not see light itself. He sees only matter, or rather the small part

of the great worlds which he knows by the name of matter, touched by light. He does not perceive the immense rays that cross the heavens save at the moment when they are stopped by an object akin to those with which his eye is familiar upon this earth: were it otherwise, the whole space filled with innumerable suns and boundless forces, instead of being an abyss of absolute darkness, absorbing and extinguishing pencils of light that shoot across it from every side, would be but a monstrous and unbearable ocean of flashes. And, if we do not see the light, at least we think we know a few of its rays or its reflexions; but we are absolutely ignorant of that which is unquestionably the essential law of the universe, namely, gravitation. What is that force, the most powerful of all and the least visible, imperceptible to our senses, without form, without colour, without temperature, without substance, without savour and with-

out voice, but so awful that it suspends and moves in space all the worlds which we see and all those which we shall never know? More rapid, more subtle, more incorporeal than thought, it wields such sway over everything that exists, from the infinitely great to the infinitely small, that there is not a grain of sand upon our earth nor a drop of blood in our veins but are penetrated, wrought upon and quickened by it until they act at every moment upon the farthest planet of the last solar system that we struggle to imagine beyond the bounds of our imagination.

Shakspeare's famous lines,

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy,"

have long since become utterly inadequate. There are no longer more things than our philosophy can dream of or imagine: there is none but things which it cannot dream of, there is nothing but the unimaginable; and,

if we do not even see the light, which is the one thing that we believed we saw, it may be said that there is nothing all around us but the invisible.

We move in the illusion of seeing and knowing that which is strictly indispensable to our little lives. As for all the rest, which is well-nigh everything, our organs not only debar us from reaching, seeing or feeling it, but even restrain us from suspecting what it is, just as they would prevent us from understanding it, if an intelligence of a different order were to bethink itself of revealing or explaining it to us. The number and volume of those mysteries is as boundless as the universe itself. If mankind were one day to draw near to those which to-day it deems the greatest and the most inaccessible, such as the origin and the aim of life, it would at once behold rising up behind them, like eternal mountains, others quite as great and quite as

unfathomable; and so on, without end. In relation to that which it would have to know in order to hold the key to this world, it would always find itself at the same point of central ignorance. It would be just the same if we possessed an intelligence several million times greater and more penetrating than ours. All that its miraculously increased power could discover would encounter limits no less impassable than at present. All is boundless in that which has no bounds. We shall be the eternal prisoners of the universe. It is therefore impossible for us to appreciate in any degree whatsoever, in the smallest conceivable respect, the present state of the universe and to say, as long as we are men, whether it follows a straight line or describes an immense circle, whether it is growing wiser or madder, whether it is advancing towards the eternity which has no end or retracing its steps towards that which had no begin-

ning. Our sole privilege within our tiny confines is to struggle towards that which appears to us the best and to remain heroically persuaded that no part of what we do within those confines can ever be wholly lost.

6

But let not all these insoluble questions drive us towards fear. From the point of view of our future beyond the grave it is in no way necessary that we should have an answer to everything. Whether the universe have already found its consciousness, whether it find it one day or seek it everlastingly, it could not exist for the purpose of being unhappy and of suffering, neither in its entirety, nor in any one of its parts; and it matters little if the latter be invisible or incommensurable, considering that the smallest is as great as the greatest in what has neither limit nor measure. To torture

a point is the same thing as to torture the worlds; and, if it torture the worlds, it is its own substance that it tortures. Its very fate, wherein we have our part, protects us; for we are simply morsels of infinity. It is inseparable from us as we are inseparable from it. Its breath is our breath, its aim is our aim and we bear within us all its mysteries. We participate in it everywhere. There is naught in us that escapes it; there is naught in it but belongs to us. It extends us, fills us, traverses us on every side. In space and time and in that which, beyond space and time, has as yet no name, we represent it and summarize it completely, with all its properties and all its future; and, if its immensity terrifies us, we are as terrifying as itself.

If, therefore, we had to suffer in it, our sufferings could be but ephemeral; and nothing matters that is not eternal. It is possible, although somewhat incomprehen-

sible, that parts should err and go astray; but it is impossible that sorrow should be one of its lasting and necessary laws; for it would have brought that law to bear against itself. In like manner, the universe is and must be its own law and its sole master: if not, the law or the master whom it must obey would be the universe alone; and the centre of a word which we pronounce without being able to grasp its scope would be simply shifted. If it be unhappy, that means that it wills its own unhappiness; if it will its unhappiness, it is mad; and, if it appear to us mad, that means that our reason works contrary to everything and to the only laws possible, seeing that they are eternal, or, to speak more humbly, that it judges what it wholly fails to understand.

7

Everything, therefore, must end, or perhaps already be, if not in a state of happi-

ness, at least in a state exempt from all suffering, all anxiety, all lasting unhappiness; and what, after all, is our happiness upon this earth, if it be not the absence of sorrow, anxiety and unhappiness?

But it is childish to talk of happiness and unhappiness where infinity is in question. The idea which we entertain of happiness and unhappiness is something so special, so human, so fragile that it does not exceed our stature and falls to dust as soon as we take it out of its little sphere. It proceeds entirely from a few contingencies of our nerves, which are made to appreciate very slight happenings, but which could as easily have felt everything the opposite way and taken pleasure in that which is now pain.

I do not know if my readers remember the striking passage in which Sir William Crookes shows how well-nigh all that we consider as essential laws of nature would be falsified in the eyes of a microscopic

man, while forces of which we are almost wholly ignorant, such as surface-tension, capillarity, the Brownian movements, would preponderate. Walking on a cabbage-leaf, for instance, after the dew had fallen, and seeing it studded with huge crystal globes, he would infer that water was a solid body which assumes spherical form and rises in the air. At no great distance, he might come to a pond, when he would observe that this same matter, instead of rising upwards, now seems to slope downwards in a vast curve from the brink. If he managed, with the aid of his friends, to throw into the water one of those enormous steel bars which we call needles, he would see that it made a sort of concave trough on the surface and floated tranquilly. From these experiments and a thousand others which he might make he would naturally deduce theories diametrically opposed to those upon which our entire existence is based.

It would be the same if the changes were made in the direction of time, to take an hypothesis imagined by the philosopher William James:

"Suppose we were able, within the length of a second, to note distinctly ten thousand events instead of barely ten, as now; if our life were then destined to hold the same number of impressions it might be a thousand times as short. We should live less than a month, and personally know nothing of the change of seasons. If born in winter, we should believe in summer as we now believe in the heats of the carboniferous era. The motions of organic beings would be so slow to our senses as to be inferred, not seen. The sun would stand still in the sky, the moon be almost free from change and so on. But now reverse the hypothesis, and suppose a being to get only one thousandth part of the sensations that we get in a given time,

and consequently to live a thousand times as long. Winters and summers will be to him like quarters of an hour. Mushrooms and the swifter growing plans will shoot into being so rapidly as to appear instantaneous creations; annual shrubs will rise and fall from the earth like restlessly boiling water-springs; the motions of animals will be as invisible as are to us the movements of bullets and cannon-balls; the sun will scour through the sky like a meteor, leaving a fiery trail behind him, &c. That such imaginary cases (barring the superhuman longevity) may be realized somewhere in the animal kingdom, it would be rash to deny."

8

We believe that we see nothing hanging over us but catastrophes, deaths, torments and disasters; we shiver at the mere thought of the great interplanetary spaces,

with their intense cold and their awful and gloomy solitudes; and we imagine that the worlds that revolve through space are as unhappy as ourselves because they freeze, or disaggregate, or clash together, or are consumed in unutterable flames. We infer from this that the genius of the universe is an abominable tyrant, seized with a monstrous madness, delighting only in the torture of itself and all that it contains. To millions of stars, each many thousand times larger than our sun, to nebulæ whose nature and dimensions no figure, no word in our language is able to express, we attribute our momentary sensibility, the little ephemeral play of our nerves; and we are convinced that life there must be impossible or appalling, because we should feel too hot or too cold. It were much wiser to say to ourselves that it would need but a trifle, a few papillæ more or less to our skin, the slightest modification of our eyes and ears,

to turn the temperature of space, its silence and its darkness into a delicious spring-time, an incomparable music, a divine light.

"Nothing is too wonderful to be true," said Faraday.

It were much more reasonable to persuade ourselves that the catastrophes which our imagination sees there are life itself, the joy and one or other of those immense festivals of mind and matter in which death, thrusting aside at last our two enemies, time and space, will soon permit us to take part. Each world dissolving, extinguished, crumbling, burnt or colliding with another world and pulverized means the commencement of a magnificent experiment, the dawn of a marvellous hope and perhaps an unexpected happiness drawn direct from the inexhaustible unknown. What though they freeze or flame, collect or disperse, pursue or flee one another: mind and matter, no longer united by the same pitiful hazard

that joined them in us, must rejoice at all that happens; for all is but birth and rebirth, a departure into an unknown filled with wonderful promises and maybe an anticipation of some ineffable event.

# CHAPTER XII

## CONCLUSIONS

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### I

IN order to retain a livelier image of all this and a more exact memory, let us give a last glance at the road which we have travelled. We have put aside, for reasons which we have stated, the religious solutions and total annihilation. Annihilation is physically impossible; the religious solutions occupy a citadel without doors or windows into which human reason does not penetrate. Next comes the hypothesis of the survival of our ego, released from its body, but retaining a full and unimpaired consciousness of its identity. We have seen that this hypothesis, strictly defined, has very little likelihood and is not greatly to be desired, although, with the surrender

of the body, the source of all our ills, it seems less to be feared than our actual existence. On the other hand, as soon as we try to extend or to exalt it, so that it may appear less barbarous or less crude, we come back to the hypothesis of a cosmic consciousness or of a modified consciousness, which, together with that of a survival without any sort of consciousness, closes the field to every supposition and exhausts every forecast of the imagination.

Survival without any sort of consciousness would be tantamount for us to annihilation pure and simple and consequently would be no more dreadful than the latter, that is to say, than a sleep with no dreams and with no awakening. The hypothesis is unquestionably more acceptable than that of annihilation; but it prejudges very rashly the questions of a cosmic consciousness and of a modified consciousness.

2

Before replying to these, we must choose our universe, for we have the choice. It is a matter of knowing how we propose to look at infinity. Is it the moveless, immovable infinity, from all eternity perfect and at its zenith, and the purposeless universe that our reason will conceive at the farthest point of our thoughts? Do we believe that, at our death, the illusion of movement and progress which we see from the depths of this life will suddenly fade away? If so, it is inevitable that, at our last breath, we shall be absorbed in what, for lack of a better term, we call the cosmic consciousness. Are we, on the other hand, persuaded that death will reveal to us that the illusion lies not in our senses, but in our reason and that, in a world incontestably alive, despite the eternity preceding our birth, all the experiments have not been made, that is to say, that movement and

evolution continue and will never and nowhere stop? In that case, we must at once accept the hypothesis of a modified or progressive consciousness. The two aspects, after all, are equally unintelligible, but defensible; and, although really irreconcilable, they agree on one point, namely, that unending pain and unredeemed misery are alike excluded from them both for ever.

3

The hypothesis of a modified consciousness does not necessitate the loss of the tiny consciousness acquired in our body; but it makes it almost negligible, flings, drowns and dissolves it in infinity. It is of course impossible to support this hypothesis with satisfactory proofs; but it is not easy to shatter it like the others. Were it permissible to speak of likeness to truth in this connexion, when our only truth is that we do not see the truth, it is the most likely of

the interim hypotheses and gives a magnificent opening for the most plausible, the most varied and the most alluring dreams. Will our ego, our soul, our spirit, or whatever we call that which will survive us in order to continue us as we are, will it find again, on leaving the body, the innumerable lives which it must have lived since the thousands of years that had no beginning? Will it continue to increase by assimilating all that it meets in infinity during the thousands of years that will have no end? Will it linger for a time around our earth, leading, in regions invisible to our eyes, an ever higher and happier existence, as the theosophists and spiritualists contend? Will it move towards other planetary systems, will it emigrate to other worlds whose existence is not even suspected by our senses? Everything seems permissible in this great dream, save that which might arrest its flight.

Nevertheless, so soon as it ventures too far in the ultramondane spaces, it crashes into strange obstacles and breaks its wings against them. If we admit that our ego does not remain eternally what it was at the moment of our death, we can no longer imagine that, at a given second, it stops, ceases to expand and rise, attains its perfection and its fulness, to become no more than a sort of motionless wreck suspended in eternity and a finished thing in the midst of that which will never finish. That would indeed be the only real death and the more fearful inasmuch as it would set a limit to an unparalleled life and intelligence, beside which those which we possess here below would not even weigh what a drop of water weighs when compared with the ocean, or a grain of sand when placed in the scales with a mountain-chain. In a word, either we believe that our evolution will one day stop, implying thereby an incomprehensible end

and a sort of inconceivable death; or we admit that it has no limit, whereupon, being infinite, it assumes all the properties of infinity and must needs be lost in infinity and united with it. This, withal, is the latter end of theosophy, spiritualism and all the religions in which man, in his ultimate happiness, is absorbed by God. And this again is an incomprehensible end, but at least it is life. And then, taking one incomprehensibility with another, after doing all that is humanly possible to understand one or the other riddle, let us by preference leap into the greatest and therefore the most probable, the one which contains all the others and after which nothing more remains. If not, the questions reappear at every stage and the answers are always conflicting. And questions and answers lead us to the same inevitable abyss. As we shall have to face it sooner or later, why not make for it straightway? All that happens to us in the

interval interests us beyond a doubt, but does not detain us, because it is not eternal.

4

Behold us then before the mystery of the cosmic consciousness. Although we are incapable of understanding the act of an infinity that would have to fold itself up in order to feel itself and consequently to define itself and separate itself from other things, this is not an adequate reason for declaring it impossible; for, if we were to reject all the realities and impossibilities that we do not understand, there would be nothing left for us to live upon. If this consciousness exist under the form which we have conceived, it is evident that we shall be there and take part in it. If there be a consciousness somewhere, or some thing that takes the place of consciousness, we shall be in that consciousness or that thing, because we cannot be elsewhere. And, as

this consciousness or this thing cannot be unhappy, because it is impossible that infinity should exist for its own unhappiness, neither shall we be unhappy when we are in it. Lastly, if the infinity into which we shall be projected have no sort of consciousness nor anything that stands for it, the reason will be that consciousness or anything that might replace it is not indispensable to eternal happiness.

5

That, I think, is about as much as we may be permitted to declare, for the moment, to the spirit anxiously facing the unfathomable space wherein death will shortly hurl it. It can still hope to find there the fulfilment of its dreams; it will perhaps find less to dread than it had feared. If it prefer to remain expectant and to accept none of the hypotheses which I have expounded to the best of my power

and without prejudice, it nevertheless seems difficult not to welcome, at least, this great assurance which we find at the bottom of every one of them, namely, that infinity could not be malevolent, seeing that, if it eternally tortured the least among us, it would be torturing something which it cannot tear out of itself and that it would therefore be torturing its very self.

I have added nothing to what was already known. I have simply tried to separate what may be true from that which is assuredly not true; for, if we do not know where truth is, we nevertheless learn to know where it is not. And, perhaps, in seeking for that undiscoverable truth, we shall have accustomed our eyes to pierce the terror of the last hour by looking it full in the face. Many things, beyond a doubt, remain to be said which others will say with greater force and brilliancy. But we need have no hope that any one will utter

on this earth the word that shall put an end to our uncertainties. It is very probable, on the contrary, that no one in this world, nor perhaps in the next, will discover the great secret of the universe. And, if we reflect upon this even for a moment, it is most fortunate that it should be so. We have not only to resign ourselves to living in the incomprehensible, but to rejoice that we cannot go out of it. If there were no more insoluble questions nor impenetrable riddles, infinity would not be infinite; and then we should have for ever to curse the fate that placed us in a universe proportionate to our intelligence. All that exists would be but a gateless prison, an irreparable evil and mistake. The unknown and the unknowable are necessary and will perhaps always be necessary to our happiness. In any case, I would not wish my worst enemy, were his understanding a thousandfold loftier and a thousandfold mightier

than mine, to be condemned eternally to inhabit a world of which he had surprised an essential secret and of which, as a man, he had begun to grasp the least atom.

THE END



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